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CHIP BRANTLEY, HOST:

Previously on WHITE LIES...

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JOANNE BLAND: They were murdered by hateful, racist people. Their lives were taken, not given - they were taken.

JERRY MITCHELL: You had witnesses. This wasn't something that happened without people seeing it.

BRADLEY CAPPS: Well, the whole damn town knew. It was a known thing.

FRANCES BOWDEN: I mean, it was celebration time because they were found not guilty. So they were really lucky. But everybody lied, so that's how they got to be lucky.

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BRANTLEY: Frances Bowden, the chain-smoking Sphinx of Washington Street, the eyewitness who had seen it all, had told us that it wasn't just the three men tried for murder who'd attacked Jim Reeb and the other two ministers on the street that night; there had been a fourth man, and he was still alive. But Frances said she'd never tell us who it was.

She seemed to relish the fact that she knew something we didn't, and it was clearly a source of enjoyment for her to lord it over us during the time we spent visiting her before she went on the record. But it wasn't just Frances. This story of the fourth man, really, it was everywhere in our reporting. Clark and Orloff described being attacked by four or five men, and in the FBI and DOJ records, it's clear they were trying to identify another attacker.

ANDREW BECK GRACE, HOST:

Knowing that there had been a fourth attacker was one thing; finding him would be a different story altogether. Would it even be possible? Over 50 years had passed since the night of the attack. But say we did find him - could he even be held accountable after so many years?

Well, it turns out this question had played out in another cold case from the civil rights era, right here in the Black Belt of Alabama, one we've already talked about - a murder directly tied to why Jim Reeb was in Selma in the first place.

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REBECCA ROBERTS, BYLINE: An Alabama jury has issued new indictments in the 1965 death of Jimmie Lee Jackson. Jackson's death led to the march on Selma, best known for its own violent ending on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

GRACE: Jimmie Lee Jackson - remember that name? Of the deaths associated with the voting rights campaign here in 1965, Jackson was killed first, in February, in the nearby town of Marion.

As you've heard, Jim Reeb's death resulted in a great outpouring of attention and protest. But Jimmie Lee Jackson - this black, 26-year-old native Alabamian, the youngest deacon in his Baptist church, who made his living as a logger - his death did not draw the eyes of the nation.

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STOKELY CARMICHAEL: What you want is the nation to be upset when anybody is killed, and especially when one of us is killed.

BRANTLEY: That's Stokely Carmichael, who later changed his name to Kwame Ture, but who, in 1965, was 23 years old, in Selma with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. This is from an interview he did in 1986, talking about the legacy of the deaths of Jimmie Lee Jackson and Jim Reeb.

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CARMICHAEL: It was almost like, you know, for this to be recognized, a white person must be killed. But what are you saying? I mean, we're dying. We died out of proportion to numbers. Of course we're bitter; we're still bitter to this day about it because it still means that our life is not worth, even in death, the life of anybody else - that their life is still more precious.

BRANTLEY: It's important to quickly punctuate the timeline here. It's like one of those chapters in the Old Testament - so-and-so begat so-and-so who begat so-and-so, and on and on, tracing the line from its origin. Jimmie Lee Jackson's death in late February 1965 was the reason for the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the march that resulted in the beating by state troopers that became known as Bloody Sunday. And the TV footage of that march is what spread across the world and what Dr. King used to call clergy to Alabama. And that call is what drew Jim Reeb to Selma, what caused him to be on Washington Street the night of March 9, 1965.

GRACE: And now their stories could come together in a new way.

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GRACE: In 2010, the man who shot Jimmie Lee Jackson pleaded guilty and was sent to prison, 45 years after the murder. And if we could find a fourth man, the district attorney who would be in the position to bring new charges would be the same one who had prosecuted Jackson's killer. So what happened to Jimmie Lee Jackson? How did they find his killer and bring him to justice? And the most complicated question for us - what could justice even look like after all these years?

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GRACE: From NPR, this is WHITE LIES. I'm Andrew Beck Grace.

BRANTLEY: And I'm Chip Brantley.

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BRANTLEY: When the state trooper who shot Jimmie Lee Jackson was charged with his murder in 2007, a woman named Mary Cosby Moore was the circuit clerk at the Perry County Courthouse in Marion, 30 miles northwest of Selma.

MARY COSBY MOORE: I think that's where my interest really grew, looking at the case and following the case and then handling all the court documents because, in that case, all the documents have to come through the clerk's office, and the discovery of it was just fascinating.

BRANTLEY: Like so many people in town, Moore had a personal attachment to the case. Even though she was only 7 years old in 1965, her family and Jimmie Lee Jackson's family knew each other well. Her grandfather was close with Jimmie Lee's grandfather, Cager Lee, and their mothers were also friends.

COSBY MOORE: As a matter of fact, Miss Viola was the first person that started my mom and chickens. She gave my mom two chickens at the time (laughter). And my mom had never dealt with chickens before, so she gave her two chickens. And my mom started raising chickens. Of course, we got so attached to the chickens that I don't think any of them ever got on the dinner table. But we did eat the eggs.

BRANTLEY: Marion was like this, smaller than Selma, more familial. Everybody seemed to know everybody, and Jimmie Lee Jackson was one of theirs. And while the voting rights campaign in Marion would often later be lumped in with the broader movement in Selma, Marion had its own local movement.

WALTA MAE KENNIE: I had participated in the movement in Birmingham. I was right down the street from where the fire hoses and the dogs and...

GRACE: That's Walta Mae Kennie, who had grown up in Marion but who left for a few years to attend college in Birmingham.

KENNIE: So I came home, and I was unable to register to vote. I registered in Birmingham, but when I got home, I still had no authority to vote here in

Marion. They'll put you off, day after day after day, but still, we would go up to the courthouse, to the registrar's. They said, come back the next day. Come back the next day. And then finally, when they did let you come in, they would give you a stack of papers about a half-inch thick, questions to answer. How many pennies in this jar? And you'd have a jar full of pennies. Or they'd ask you something about some dead president, or back in the 1800s or 1500s - besiege us with question after question. And you could not answer them.

GRACE: These so-called literacy tests, which weren't fully banned until 1970, could also include sections that required prospective voters to read aloud, then interpret, then transcribe long passages of legalese from the Alabama Constitution, a notoriously noxious and long-winded document that was crafted in 1901 with the explicit mandate to, quote, "establish white supremacy in this state," end quote. That same constitution, by the way, is still the basic governing document of the state of Alabama.

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ALBERT TURNER: But it became my job - some of us - to try to teach people how to pass the test, even though we couldn't pass ourselves.

GRACE: The local leader of the voting rights movement in Marion was Albert Turner. Like Walta Mae Kennie, Turner was a recent college graduate who was fed up with the lack of racial progress in his hometown. Turner died in the year 2000, but here he is from a filmed interview in 1979.

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TURNER: And I had insisted and I had tried and always thought I was a pretty good student myself, and it was kind of an affront to me that these dummies who was the registrars was saying to me that I couldn't pass a test that they was giving, and they couldn't hardly write their names.

GRACE: By the beginning of 1965, Turner and other local leaders had been trying to register black voters for a few years, but they'd managed to register only 75 people. But as more national voting rights organizations came to

Selma in January, some of them began fanning out into neighboring communities, including Marion. And when they did, the energy there changed.

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TURNER: The first Monday in February 1965 was our voter registration day, and of course, we called this D-Day. We had intended that we had no longer, no longer that we planned to go through the jive of passing no tests, so we was just going down and have direct action until we got the right to vote. And we stayed in line all day long, until finally, they arrested us, really, and put us in jail.

GRACE: What followed was a wave of mass arrests in the area, with hundreds of demonstrators taken in. The surrounding jails were too small to hold everyone who was arrested, and so many people were sent to Camp Selma, a work camp on the outskirts of town. Walta Mae Kennie was among those who was sent to Camp Selma.

KENNIE: I'd never seen anything like it. It was over a hundred of us in this one big room. They had one toilet and water in a dipper. There were students, old people, people on medication. Some people got sick. We had to clean people up. And that many people cluttered in this one place - it almost get too painful to talk about.

GRACE: Eventually, so many people were arrested they ran out of room, and authorities had to turn everybody loose. It was just too much for the system to handle. But something about these mass arrests changed the tenor of the protests.

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TURNER: After that point, we, you know, kind of got madder and madder, whatever you want to say. And finally, this time, it even - we had decided to go around the clock. We was going to demonstrate day and night.

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BRANTLEY: Night marches were rare because they were so dangerous. On a basic logistical level, they were just harder to plan and execute. But also, under the cover of darkness, the crowds of hostile whites who would gather in opposition to the March felt even less inhibited than usual, more likely to lash out in violence.

The marchers in Marion, though, knew the stakes.

KENNIE: Nobody spoke of dying. We left home. We didn't know if we were coming back or not. But you didn't say that. Some people would leave their kids, they would leave their children, and say, if something - if we don't get back, go to grandma's. We got all the important papers stacked right here. So that's how dedicated people were. They never said, well, we're going to die of this. If you don't get back so - you're not really living anyways. You're just existing.

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GRACE: On February 18, Albert Turner called for a night march. Officials in Marion had heard about the plans and radioed for reinforcements. Selma police officers, Dallas County deputies, members of Sheriff Jim Clark's posse, Alabama state troopers, scores of outside law enforcement rolled into Marion.

So did Richard Valeriani, who was covering the Selma campaign as a correspondent for NBC News and got wind of what was happening over in Perry County. Things were relatively quiet in Selma that day, so we drove over and arrived in Marion just before the night march began. This is from an interview he did in 1985.

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RICHARD VALERIANI: We knew there was going to be trouble right away because local folks came up to us and threatened us, sprayed our cameras with black paint so we couldn't shoot, ordered us to put the cameras down and harassed us. And it was a very tense situation.

BRANTLEY: Turner had called for the march to start after a mass meeting at a church in the center of Marion.

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TURNER: OK, as we went out of the church that night to begin the actual march, we got roughly about a half a block from the door. And the sheriff of the county at that time and several troopers halted us. And, of course, they started whipping people at that point, so all of us tried to get back into the church. The line of demonstrators still was in the door of the church. The demonstration really never did get all the way out of the church.

KENNIE: And we started to turn. They said, go back inside. Go back inside. They're beating people up here. They're beating us up. So we turned and went back around the side of the church. And as we got around to the side of the church, there was people coming with billy clubs and sticks and beating people.

TURNER: The town was surrounded. There was nowhere to go, really. The town - the whole town was surrounded that night by auxiliary police, state troopers, sheriffs and everybody who wanted to come in, really, who felt like beating folk up. Some of us tried to go back in the front door. And some of us just went where we could because as we moved, they also moved. They was whipping us as we went. Billy clubs was broken on people's heads. And I got in the back door of the church, and quite a few other people did. But Jimmie Jackson was not able to make it back in the church. He went down the hill below the church into a small cafe.

BRANTLEY: The place Jimmie Lee Jackson ran into was called Mack's Cafe. On the second floor above it was a bar.

ELIJAH ROLLINS: I was in the club, and I heard noise. And I thought maybe it was the people singing and marching as usual.

BRANTLEY: That's Elijah Rollins. He would be the one who would wind up burying Jimmie Lee Jackson. Today he runs the funeral home in Marion that sits on the very spot where the attack took place.

ROLLINS: So I walked out on the front porch, and I saw that it was something different altogether. It wasn't the march. And other people were screaming and hollering. People's heads were being torn up, beat across the head, wherever they could be hit at, whatever.

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VALERIANI: I guess in the excitement, somebody walked up behind me and hit me with an axe handle, hit me in the head with an axe handle.

BRANTLEY: The NBC correspondent Richard Valeriani.

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VALERIANI: And then somebody walked up to me - a white man walked up to me, and he said, are you hurt? Do you need a doctor? And I was stunned. And I put my hand - the back of my head. And I pulled it back, and it was full of blood. And I said to him, yeah, I think I do. I'm bleeding. And then he thrust his face right up against mine. He said, well, we don't have doctors for people like you.

GRACE: Jimmie Lee Jackson's 82-year-old grandfather, Cager Lee, was also hit with a billy club in the back of the head. He stumbled from the church down into Mack's Cafe, looking for Jimmie, who could take him to the hospital. But as they tried to leave the cafe, state troopers came through the door and wouldn't let them leave. Jimmie tried to press through them with his grandfather, but they threw Jimmie down and started beating him. When Jimmie's mother tried to get the men off her son, they knocked her back.

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TURNER: And then they took Jimmie and pinned him against the walls of the building. And at close range, they shot him in the side - just took the pistol and put it in his side and shot him. After shooting him, then they ran him out of the door of the cafe, out of the front door of the cafe. And as he run out the door, the remaining troopers or some of the remaining troopers were lined up

down the sidewalk back toward the church. And as he ran down, they simply kept hitting him as he kept running through.

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VERA BOOKER: I always kept a brain book as I called it - what you did, who'd you see, the time, and everything that you've done - which, really, was a book that they'd given us with every day of the year and somewhere to write. But this one is 2/18/65. That's the date this was made in a composition book. This is original.

GRACE: Vera Booker was a nurse at Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma. You heard from her in an earlier episode. Booker had just clocked in at 11 p.m. for the night shift on February 18. Here's what she wrote in her brain book for that day.

BOOKER: A call came in. It said that the young man had been shot in Marion and was on their way to the Good Samaritan. And his name - Jimmie Lee Jackson. He was 26 years old, OK? His address was route 3, box 37, Marion, Ala. That was way before zip codes. And when he came in, brought him in. And he was all bent over, poor little thing. Gunshot wound of abdomen, that's his complaint. Also, a laceration on back of head, approximately two inches long. That's what I put down because that's what I saw.

All right, how it happened - this is it. Left mass meeting at church in Marion, Ala., and went to a cafe, was shot by a state trooper. He didn't give me no name.

GRACE: The ER in Good Sam had four curtained stalls. They put Jimmie on the table in the second one.

BOOKER: Got him up on there and tried to stretch him out. But he was in such pain, he was just coming back up. And then I noticed when I pulled the sheet up, there was a hole on the left side as big as a grapefruit. Intestines was out of that hole.

GRACE: They gave him morphine, then x-rayed him. And then later that night, he underwent surgery. For a couple of days after, it appeared that he might recover from the wounds. Booker recalls feeling hopeful in those first days.

BOOKER: He was one of the patients in my life that - I just encouraged him. And he was one of the ones I was sure would get well. I just knew Jimmie Lee would be all right. But that third, fourth night, I could tell he was just getting weaker, and he was getting fever. I knew then. I said, Lord, he's getting infected - getting infected. He did. He died eight days later.

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GRACE: Two funerals were held for Jimmie Lee Jackson. There was an open-casket memorial service at Brown Chapel AME in Selma, which nearly 3,000 people showed up for, and one at the church in Marion, where he'd been a deacon. After the Marion service, a procession half a mile long walked four miles to the Heard Cemetery, where Jimmie Lee Jackson was buried.

BOOKER: I've been by the cemetery. And after - I don't know whether you've probably heard this - after he died and everything, someone went and shot the grave up - tombstone. I mean, the holes are there. I've been there. You ever go to Marion - on that road? They shot it up. That wasn't good enough, for him to die. They shot his tombstone. The marks are still there.

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GRACE: A little bit of poison ivy out here.

CHUCK FAGER: Well, it's been three plus years since I've been here. And I'm looking at this thing.

BRANTLEY: We're standing at Jimmie Lee Jackson's grave just a little ways outside of Marion. And we're looking at the bullet holes in the headstone. We've come here today with Chuck Fager. In '65, Fager worked in Selma for Dr. King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

FAGER: I don't think I see new bullet holes. Maybe that means people have decided to leave it alone. I don't know. It was shocking when I first saw it.

GRACE: Have you ever seen the video footage of the funeral here?

FAGER: No, but I was in it.

GRACE: You were here for the funeral.

FAGER: Yeah. As a matter of fact, that was the last time that I was asked to march around Dr. King.

BRANTLEY: One of Fager's jobs during the Selma campaign was to stick close to Dr. King. He wasn't called a bodyguard, but that was essentially the deal. The day of Jackson's funeral, it was drizzling rain.

GRACE: I've only seen the footage, but it looked like it was just the most ominous day for a funeral, you know?

FAGER: Yeah, and we marched all the way. This is a pretty long stretch...

GRACE: Yeah, it is.

FAGER: ...From town. We came all the way out here in the rain. Lots of - I think umbrellas protected Dr. King from snipers more than I did or anybody else 'cause it was - there were lots of umbrellas in the rain.

GRACE: It's interesting. And something we've talked a lot about - standing here in front of Jimmie Lee Jackson's grave is probably a good place to talk about it - the contrast and comparison between Jimmie Lee's death and Reeb's death.

FAGER: A white man's death gets more attention. Is racism partly behind that? Yes. I have no quarrel with that. That's not the whole story. There's an importance to Jimmie Lee Jackson's death, which I maybe didn't realize as much till much later. Jimmie Lee Jackson's death catalyzed the black community in this part of the state, OK? It was a big deal here. OK, it didn't

get it international whatever. But the catalytic effect on the black community here was very important to Bevel's ability - I mean, it created a force that he was able to mobilize and direct into the march.

BRANTLEY: Fager is talking about James Bevel, the charismatic field organizer of the SCLC, who was directing the operations in Selma. Bevel's response to Jackson's death was that some large demonstration needed to happen.

FAGER: He found a Bible verse somewhere in the Old Testament where somebody says, I must go see the king. And that became his refrain. The king was George Wallace, and we got to go see the king and tell him this has to stop. They had enough after Jimmie Lee Jackson, and they wanted to do something.

BERNARD LAFAYETTE: Well, after Jimmie Lee Jackson was killed, Jim Bevel and I decided to go and pay a visit to the family.

BRANTLEY: That's Bernard Lafayette, a veteran civil rights organizer who helped lay the groundwork for the voting rights campaign here.

LAFAYETTE: And when we arrived, his home was just like one of those shotgun houses. And it was on stilts, you know, bricks and stuff like that, and there was open sewage running in the backyard. And the whole family had been brutalized. There was his grandfather with the knot on his head, and there was his mother all bandaged up and sister with her arm broken. There were broken spirits and also broken bones

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BRANTLEY: For months, there have been demonstrations in Marion and in Selma. But this event - the unbridled violence, the police brutality, the shooting of Jimmie Lee Jackson - it was categorically different.

LAFAYETTE: We were sitting in the kitchen, and Bevel asked the grandfather whether he thought the marches should continue. And he very quickly, you

know, said, yes, definitely they should continue. He said, I've lost everything; I have nothing more to lose now.

BRANTLEY: Sitting at the kitchen table with Jimmie Lee Jackson's grandfather, hearing his accounting of what could be gained and what could be lost, it all sounded familiar to Bernard Lafayette.

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GRACE: A couple of years before this, Bernard Lafayette was just starting out with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, known as SNCC. SNCC was sending staff into rural communities to begin voter registration drives, and Lafayette wanted to be the director of one of those projects.

LAFAYETTE: I was 22 years old. So, you know, 22 - you got to be in charge of something.

GRACE: So he went to SNCC headquarters in Atlanta.

LAFAYETTE: And there was a map of the South, and there was Alabama, but it had an X through it. I said, well, what about Alabama? He said, well, we're not going there because we already sent two teams of SNCC workers there and they came back with the same report. Nothing could be done there in Dallas County. They had the same reason, they said, it was - white folks were too mean and black people too scared.

GRACE: But Lafayette went anyway. Soon he was in Selma surveying the challenge.

LAFAYETTE: As long as you have people who are afraid, they also believe that nothing can be done. And they want things to stay the same. So my first task had to deal with helping scared black folks, you know, have some courage.

GRACE: When Lafayette arrived in Selma in early 1963, the civil rights movement was reaching its apex. The Montgomery bus boycott and then the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides had unleashed a wave of activism against segregation and against voting restrictions. And it would only build from

there. Finally, white Americans seemed to be paying attention. But these other demonstrations had happened in larger cities. Selma was an entirely different story.

LAFAYETTE: Black families had worked for the same white family for generations. And some of the women there were wet nurses; they nursed some of the white children. So there was a closeness that you couldn't imagine. First of all, they didn't believe change was possible, and then they didn't want to disturb their relationship because they felt very protective. They used to tell me that if God wanted us to be equal with whites, he would have made us white. You had to have a great imagination that any change was going to happen in Selma, Ala.

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CHARLES MAULDIN: There was an area next to Selma University where the young folks would gather; it's called the block, and we sort of would hang down there.

GRACE: Charles Mauldin was a 15-year-old high school student in 1963.

MAULDIN: And Bernard Lafayette started showing up down there and talking to guys like myself; began to ask us simple questions like, well, why can't your parents vote, or why can't you drink out of the white water fountain? Or - just simple questions that we had no answers to. We had been terrorized into staying inside of the box, and he began to ask questions that we had never dared ask ourselves because it was just too threatening. That would've been a danger to white society.

GRACE: In talking to high-schoolers like Charles Mauldin, Lafayette was assembling an army for an as-yet-unannounced battle. What they were gearing up for wasn't just a campaign of incremental skirmishes to achieve legislative victories; this was a broader battle to change the very consciousness of Americans.

MAULDIN: Once our consciousness was opened by people like Stokely and Bernard Lafayette, John Lewis, our minds grew by leaps and bounds. And

unless you're sort of booted out of normalcy, then it's normal to not strive to increase your consciousness, you know. And Dr. King talked about that in Montgomery, about ending certain types of normalcies. You know, the normalcy of white supremacy, the normalcy of, like, poverty, the normalcy of the lack of distribution of wealth - that's normal. It takes electricity to somehow shock you out of that. And we had no way of understanding whether we'd succeeded or not because it was all so new and so much bigger than probably anything that'd happened since the Civil War.

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GRACE: Selma had been the X on the map in the SNCC office in Atlanta for a reason; it had a reputation for being too volatile a place to organize. But Lafayette figured out a way to harness that volatility so that Selma was now generating the right kind of electricity - the kind of electricity that would bring hundreds of black people to the courthouse to register to vote each month, the kind of electricity that would fill the jails with peaceful protesters, the kind of electricity that would attract the attention of the Department of Justice.

BRANTLEY: The Department of Justice actually sued the city in a first-of-its-kind lawsuit over unconstitutional voter suppression in 1964. You may remember this from an earlier episode - among the named plaintiffs were Sheriff Jim Clark and the local prosecutor Blanchard McLeod, who had failed to gain a conviction against the men accused of killing Jim Reeb.

And after Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot in Marion, it was up to Blanchard McLeod to determine what to do. A shooting demands an inquiry. A state trooper shot an unarmed civil rights demonstrator in the stomach.

McLeod told the press he had a signed confession of the shooter, but that the man had claimed self-defense. McLeod refused to identify him and refused to even acknowledge that he was a state trooper. It's unclear what evidence was presented to the grand jury, but no indictment was handed down.

These things, though, are clear. That the man who shot Jimmie Lee Jackson was not brought to justice in 1965. That Jackson's death made his grandfather say to Bernard Lafayette and to James Bevel, yes, keep marching; I don't have

anything left to lose. And that the march which then happened resulted in another brutal attack, this one in broad daylight, at the foot of a bridge, with television cameras rolling. And that footage, broadcast around the world, begat a call from Dr. King, which begat a swarm of ministers to Selma, among whom was a Unitarian from Boston named Jim Reeb.

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GRACE: The Alabama state trooper who shot Jimmie Lee Jackson wasn't publicly identified at the time. Decades later, he admitted to pulling the trigger. But he didn't make this admission to police who were investigating the crime. Instead, he admitted it to a reporter. That's after this.

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JOHN FLEMING: I had heard about him when I was growing up, when I was still a kid growing up in south Alabama, that he was - had been a former state trooper. He spent time in Vietnam. He was an intriguing character. He ran for public office a couple of times. And I had also heard that he had killed a man during the civil rights movement. But that's all; that's all I heard.

GRACE: John Fleming is now the executive editor of the Center for Sustainable Journalism. Before that, he spent years covering conflicts in South and West Africa, then returned to his native Alabama to work for The Anniston Star.

FLEMING: Everyone knows about Jimmie Lee Jackson. Everyone - there's ample reporting about how he was killed in this place called Mack's Cafe. But it just refers to the trooper, the trooper.

GRACE: Fleming had always been interested in these unsolved murders of the civil rights era. And he started thinking back about the Jimmie Lee Jackson story. He wondered if this man he'd grown up hearing about, James Bonard Fowler, was the same trooper who'd shot Jimmie Lee Jackson.

FLEMING: I made a few inquiries. The people I knew in south Alabama and a friend of mine who knew him offered an introduction. And it took a few weeks

to get it into place, but we met at this ranch house down in south Alabama - bucolic woods all around, fishpond next door. And we were sitting on couches. But he did ask for a beer early on, and someone went and fetched him a Natural Light, as I recall. And then we just started. And one of the very first things that Bonard Fowler told me was that he was indeed the person he shot and killed Jimmie Lee Jackson.

GRACE: After Fleming published his story, it didn't take long for the news to make its way to Selma and Marion.

MICHAEL JACKSON: I'm going to be very honest on this because I believe in being blunt and honest - I thought Fowler was dead. So many years had passed, I just - I had grew up reading this stuff, and we learned about it in school, too. So at the time I became district attorney - I actually took office in January 2005 - I thought Fowler was dead.

GRACE: That's District Attorney Michael Jackson. In 2005, he was newly elected and the only African American DA in Alabama. His circuit, which consists of five counties, is the largest in the state.

JACKSON: And once that interview hit, I started getting calls from everybody - letters, calls - people calling, saying, you need to open up an investigation. And I said, fine. I didn't think anything was going to come of it, but it was my job as district attorney to look into it.

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JACKSON: So I hopped in my car and went down to Marion, the courthouse in Marion, and sat on the corner, waiting for folks to pass - walk by.

GRACE: A confession to a newspaper reporter is one thing, but in order to actually prosecute the case, Jackson would need more than that - he needed witnesses. So he just went down to the courthouse and started watching people.

JACKSON: And I'm figuring, I'm calculating the age of people. I'm saying, well, this person would've been around then if they grew up in Marion. So I started talking to people.

GRACE: And pretty quickly, that first day, actually, he found a few people who knew people who had been there. A few weeks passed. He gathered more people who could testify. And finally, he made his way to Vera Booker.

BOOKER: 2/18/65 - that's the date this was made in a composition book. This is original.

JACKSON: And Ms. Booker can talk. And so after Ms. Booker, I think that was, like, the final thing. I said, OK, I'm going to take this to the grand jury. I think I got enough.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED BROADCAST)

ROBERT SIEGEL, BYLINE: NPR's Debbie Elliott has more.

DEBBIE ELLIOTT, BYLINE: Standing in a courtroom in rural Marion, Ala., today, 77-year-old James Fowler said he didn't mean to kill anyone. Fowler was soon to face trial for the 1965 murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young voting rights activist shot to death during a clash with white state troopers. District Attorney Michael Jackson, no relation to the victim, says Fowler agreed to plead guilty to second-degree manslaughter and will serve six months in jail.

BRANTLEY: Fowler was sentenced to six months, but spent only five in jail. He was released in the spring of 2011, died in the summer of 2015. If you go to Marion today and talk to people about what happened in this case, you'll hear a lot of different opinions. Some will say that Fowler never should've been tried in the first place. He was an old man. What's past is past - water under the bridge. Others will say the short jail time was an insult to Jimmie Lee Jackson's memory, that Fowler walked free for 45 years. And that whole time, the main law enforcement agency of the state of Alabama knew his identity.

But Michael Jackson had a tough decision to make. So many years had passed since the crime, so few living witnesses. And to take a case this polarizing to trial, it all brought the possibility of a hung jury and a retrial. What if Fowler died in the interim without ever being held accountable? For Michael Jackson, a plea deal seemed like the best way to square the circle.

What's the best case scenario for one of these?

JACKSON: Well, I think - of course, the best case is the defendant gets some time. But the second thing is just to bring answers to the family, you know, about what actually happened. These cases like Reverend Reed are cases that are discussed in books that kids read when they're growing up. And so to know the truth, I just think that's very important. Whether somebody goes to jail or not, you're still trying to bring closure to these folks' families and also history.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

FLEMING: Going back to those communities and telling those stories from beginning to end is something of a healing process for those communities and for the South and for the nation. And of course, we still haven't had that. Having that outing of all the wrongs that were done is just - it's hugely important as a starting point for rebuilding your society. And we've never really had that before. And it's a collective cleansing that we still need. We can go another hundred years, but we're still going to need it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: Fleming had found Fowler because he remembered a story from his youth about an eccentric man who may have shot a civil rights worker. Michael Jackson had found witnesses by installing himself on the courthouse square and simply asking people over a certain age if they knew anything about Jimmie Lee Jackson's murder.

And if we were going to find the fourth man who had attacked Jim Reeb, Orloff Miller and Clark Olsen on the corner of Washington Street on March 9, 1965, we would have to use a process of elimination. If what Frances said was

true, that there was another person involved in the attack, surely his name was somewhere in the FBI file.

There are roughly 200 names in the FBI file. We'd already identified all the potential witnesses the FBI had interviewed. But somewhere in the 264 pages of the file, we felt certain we would find the man's name. So we knocked on more doors, made still more phone calls to disconnected numbers, drove back and forth across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Almost invariably, we'd stop at the Selma Public Library, looking for addresses by consulting their collection of phone books going back to the '50s.

And from the south-facing windows on the second floor of the library, you can look down on to the corner of Washington Street to the exact spot where the attack on the three ministers took place. And it was on one of these days when I was at the library looking for addresses and reading newspapers on the microfilm machine that Chip was on the other side of town, knocking on the door of the fourth man.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: It was just before lunch when I knocked on the front door of a house at the end of a dead-end street. A woman in her late 60s cracked open the door. I introduced myself and told her I was working on a story about Selma in 1965 about an attack on some ministers down on Washington Street. I told her I'd come across the name of a man who may have been on the street that night and might know something about the attack. I wondered if the man listed at this address was the same man from that night in 1965.

Yes, she said. You're in the right place. She said she was his wife. They'd gotten together in the early 1970s after all this happened. But when they decided to get married, he told her all about his past. She said I was welcome to come in and talk with him. It'd be good for him to talk, she said, because he'd had three small strokes recently and was having some memory issues.

She led me down a hallway into their den, where the man was lying on a recliner watching Fox News. I told him that I'd found his name in the FBI file related to the attack on Jim Reeb, that according to the file, the FBI had tried

to talk to him twice back in 1965, but that he'd refused, that we were now trying to get a definitive account of what happened on the night of March 9, 1965 and that I was hoping he would tell me what he knows about that night.

I don't know, he said. I have trouble remembering things. I could see them in my mind, but I just can't get them out of my mouth. As we talked, there were moments when the man would forget what he was talking about, when he'd begin to answer a question but then stop and ask me again what it was I wanted to know. I thought of my grandmother, who had gone through something like this toward the end of her life. And sitting there, imagining some stranger showing up at her house to ask her about her past, I felt like a snake in the grass.

But then - then there were these other moments of lucidity, when this man got through a whole story and seemed to recall it as if it were just last week. And each of those moments was a little reminder of why I was there - to get the truth about the murder of Jim Reeb.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: I kept trying to steer the conversation back to that night on Washington Street. At one point, the man said he'd thought about writing everything down about that night, but now he couldn't do it. What would you have written down? I asked him. What do you remember about that night? All I did, he said, was kick one of them. His wife then said, you never knew you did so much - did you? - until you heard about it on the news the next day.

I asked them if I could come back and record an interview with them, but the man's wife said, no, I don't think we would do that. But she did say that we were welcome to come back and visit any time.

GRACE: This man had said that he was there, that he and Elmer Cook and the Hoggle brothers had attacked the three ministers on the street. The attack caused the death of Jim Reeb. But we needed to confirm his story. So we returned to the Sphinx of Washington Street. After all, it was Frances Bowden, the eyewitness to the attack, who had told us about the existence of this fourth man.

When we stopped by Selma Bail Bond, Frances was, as always, behind her desk, smoking her Winston Light 100s. We told her that we had an idea about who the fourth man was, and she said, again, that she wouldn't tell us his name. We said, if we tell you his name, will you tell us if we're right?

She smiled gamely and nodded, like sure, go for it. When we said the man's name, she blanched and pointed her cigarette at us. You can't tell anybody, she said. It'll get him in a lot of trouble. It could get me in a lot of trouble. We told Frances she should just go on the record and tell us about the fourth attacker. But she said she'd lie about it if we told anybody she knew the identity of the fourth man.

So what could we do? Well, we kept going back to visit with this man and his wife. We'd sit underneath the cedar trees on the far end of the driveway. He had good days and bad days. We watched the hummingbirds. One time he looked at me smiling and said, I know I should know you, but I don't know you.

And then, finally, one day, they said we could record them.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I don't remember nothing. I don't want to remember nothing.

BRANTLEY: Why don't you want to remember?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: When I wanted to lose it, I lost it and never said a word for it. I never opened my mouth for nobody.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: That's next time on WHITE LIES.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LAY IT DOWN")

DONNIE FRITTS: (Singing) Traveling down two different roads trying hard to leave alone. We take advantage (ph), but we can't let go. It's so hard to lay it down. Hiding me, Anna (ph), confide in me. Don't you think it's time to be all the things, oh, you tried to be? You and me should lay it down. Well, speak to me, be unashamed. There's no need, no, in playing games. After all, we're just all the same, trying hard to lay it down.

BRANTLEY: WHITE LIES is produced by us, Graham Smith, Nicole Beemsterboer and Connor Towne O'Neill, with help from Cat Schuknecht. Our researcher is Barbara Van Woerkom.

GRACE: Robert Little edits the show, along with N'Jeri Eaton, Keith Woods and Christopher Turpin. Audio engineers include Jay Ciz (ph), James Willits (ph) and Alex Drewinzkis (ph). Music is composed by Jeff T. Byrd. Special thanks to Donnie Fritts for the use of this song, "Lay It Down," courtesy of Single Lock Records.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LAY IT DOWN")

FRITTS: (singing) ...Take us from, oh, this self-made hell (ph). Find a way to lay it down. I'm burdened by all the things I've learned....

BRANTLEY: Archival tape in this episode comes from Washington University in St. Louis. Special thanks to Dr. Billie Jean Young and the people at Lottie's Restaurant in Marion. Neal Carruth is NPR's general manager for podcasts, and Anya Grundmann is the senior vice president for programming. Visit us on the web at npr.org/whitelies.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LAY IT DOWN")

FRITTS: (Singing) Lay it down, brother - lay it down - it's so hard to lay it down - lay it down. Lay it down, my sister - lay it down - you and me should lay it down - lay it down. Ooh, lay it down - lay it down - we've got to find a way to lay it down (ph). Lay it down.

S1 e6

ANDREW BECK GRACE, HOST:

Hi, everyone. This is Andy. This week, we need your help. Please go to npr.org/podcastsurvey to take a quick survey about the show. It'll help us learn more about our audience so we can connect to more folks like you. That's npr.org/podcastsurvey.

CHIP BRANTLEY, HOST:

Also, be sure to check out our website at npr.org/whitelies. It's got a bunch of new stuff up, including parts of the FBI case file and lots of new photos. Again, that's npr.org/whitelies. Thanks.

GRACE: And now, the show.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: Previously on WHITE LIES...

(SOUNDBITE OF MONTAGE)

CLARK OLSEN: Just as we're walking in there, we saw three or four men. I was quite sure at the time there were four men who came across the street at us.

FRANCES BOWDEN: They asked me questions about what I saw. And I told them. But I answered truthfully except for telling them who it was. I did not name no names - did not.

JOHN FLEMING: Going back to those communities and telling those stories from beginning to end is something of a healing process for those communities and for the South and for the nation. And of course, we still haven't had that.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: Hello, hello. Got to - make sure we got the levels. So y'all were saying - sorry. Go ahead.

INA PORTWOOD: I think I was talking about him and his relation to Elmer Cook. Now, can you tell us about Elmer Cook?

BILL PORTWOOD: I tried to forget it 'cause I knew damn well a long time ago they were going to kill me. But I can't do a whole lot. I really can't. It's honest. You ever had an honest truth from something there? And that's what - I don't even want to talk about it 'cause...

BRANTLEY: You said it scared you just thinking about - thinking about being a part of it was scary...

B PORTWOOD: I was a part of it. I was part of it.

GRACE: That's Bill - Bill Portwood - the fourth man. We'd been visiting for months when he and his wife Ina finally allowed us to record them. It would turn out to be the only interview we'd ever get on tape with Bill Portwood - in fact, the only interview anyone would ever get with him.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: During these visits, we'd watched as his mental state further declined. Sometimes he couldn't remember us. He often claimed to have no memory of the years we wanted to talk with him about. But then something would kind of unlock in him, and we could glimpse the memories he claimed to have forgotten. And these glimpses of Bill Portwood's memories, that's what finally allowed us to tell the true story of what happened to Jim Reeb.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: From NPR, this is WHITE LIES. I'm Andrew Beck Grace.

BRANTLEY: And I'm Chip Brantley.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: In 1965, Bill Portwood worked as a cabinetmaker. On the side, during the '60s and early '70s, he also worked as hired muscle for Elmer Cook, the man Frances Bowden told us was the first to swing the club at Jim Reeb. Cook ran a bar called Club 21, where there was gambling and other illegal activities. And Portwood worked as a bouncer at the club and also was an enforcer when Cook needed to collect gambling and loan debts. This all happened before he met his third wife, Ina, in the mid-'70s.

BRANTLEY: What about that night that Elmer hit James Reeb? Do you remember anything from that night?

B PORTWOOD: What was it?

I PORTWOOD: Do you remember anything about the night that Elmer hit that Reed man?

BRANTLEY: Reeb.

I PORTWOOD: Reeb.

B PORTWOOD: Did I?

I PORTWOOD: You were there. Do you remember anything about it?

B PORTWOOD: I was there, but I can't tell you. Hell, man, I didn't want to know nothing. You know, you've been with something that you don't want it. I don't want it. I told her. I said, Ina, I've got to get it out of my system.

I PORTWOOD: I think he was with the ones that night.

B PORTWOOD: I was...

I PORTWOOD: He saw the man. He was in the group.

BRANTLEY: With the Hoggle brothers and Elmer Cook?

I PORTWOOD: He was in with them, and he saw it.

B PORTWOOD: Yeah. You know, I can't remember that. I don't - hell, when you get bad stuff, you leave it alone - learn not to hear it. I had to get rid of it in my mind, and it's gone.

I PORTWOOD: But you worked in that group. And you were the muscle, I think, behind them. You were the bouncer.

B PORTWOOD: Yeah, I was.

I PORTWOOD: But he got out of it. But he had never, never had any trouble with the law.

BRANTLEY: Yeah.

I PORTWOOD: In fact, him and the sheriff was buddies, too. They were all friends. These men, they did their thing. And they were mean and hard and vicious, but they never broke the law as far as I've ever heard. And back in them times, Bill was a mean son of a b****, too.

BRANTLEY: Bill - this Bill?

I PORTWOOD: Yeah.

BRANTLEY: How so?

B PORTWOOD: I was real, real bad. But I didn't kill. It was mostly just stomping the hell out of somebody that Duck - that they didn't like. I was a bad, bad boy. And - but I never have been able to get, you know, caught. I didn't get no...

I PORTWOOD: No. No, you never were - had any trouble with the law. Never.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: Bill Portwood is mentioned nine times in the over 200 pages of the FBI file, usually just as a passing reference. Page 119 - quote, "Pruitt also stated he does not know a William or Bill Portwood." Page 169 - quote,

"Woodson advised he does not know Bill Portwood but stated there is a customer who frequents the club and who is called Pulpwood (ph)." And then on Page 181, agents try and talk to Portwood himself, but he refuses to give a statement. The next page, Portwood's wife at the time talks to agents. Quote, "it is Mrs. Portwood's recollection that her husband remained home the evening of March 9, 1965, going over schoolwork with his daughter," end quote.

B PORTWOOD: When I wanted to lose it, I lost it. People say, well, you hear it. I don't hear it. I couldn't hear it if you sit there and tell me of it 'cause it was tough. And hell, he'd kill you if you - (laughter) - you didn't interfere with him.

BRANTLEY: Elmer?

B PORTWOOD: Yeah, Elmer. You left that alone. And I was close to him as - (spitting) - right there. And I played that damn thing with him, and I could've got hurt, got killed. But I don't know - how did I get by it?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: How did I get by it? It was hard to know sometimes, when talking to Bill, what he meant by these elliptical thoughts. But looking at the FBI file, it's pretty easy to see how he got by the investigation. There are 192 names indexed in the file, and Portwood was far from a central character. But the statement of Stanley Hoggle, one of the men arrested and later tried for the murder along with his brother Duck and Elmer Cook, that's the reason why we decided to knock on Portwood's door. Stanley was the only one of the defendants who made a statement to investigators. He says that he, Duck, Elmer and Bill Portwood were together that night on Washington Street at the time of the attack. He even says what all the men are wearing - Portwood in, quote, "khaki pants and shirt."

Memory loss after a stroke is common. If you think of the brain like a map, it's as though certain portions of that map have been erased, and so the route from one place to another doesn't make sense anymore. But what Portwood describes to us is something different. He tells us that decades ago, before the strokes, he willed himself to forget that part of his life. He says after Elmer

died in 1972, he made a conscious decision to change. At Elmer's funeral, he looked down at the casket and said he didn't want this life anymore. And by the time Ina met him, he had turned his life around. And because no one ever called him to account for what he did on March 9, 1965, he was allowed to forget, allowed to will himself into oblivion.

B PORTWOOD: I just - I just wouldn't talk about it no more, would I, Ina?

I PORTWOOD: No. You told me that that was your life and that you didn't want it anymore - that it was dangerous and you was getting out of it; that when you looked at Elmer, you told me what you felt. But when you walked out of that church away from the casket, you were a different person. And you never did want to go back.

BRANTLEY: What do you remember thinking about that?

B PORTWOOD: I don't remember nothing. I just don't remember nothing. I don't want to remember nothing.

BRANTLEY: Why don't you want to remember?

B PORTWOOD: 'Cause, hell, they'd kill me.

I PORTWOOD: See; this happened way long before I met him. That's what he told me. But he was scared to - scared of it, afraid of being killed, knew people that had been killed. And he wanted out of that life and got out. Now, when I met him, he had got back in the church and was a deacon in the church and doing good. But he told me the life he was in - to a point - that it was bad and that he got out. And he...

B PORTWOOD: She can tell you more of it than I can tell her.

BRANTLEY: So you don't remember anything from the Reeb trial - I mean, 'cause Elmer and Stanley and Duck were tried and then acquitted. And you managed to lie low, right?

B PORTWOOD: Stay away from it and never say a word for it. I never opened my mouth for nobody. I believe - I would really like to remember. I mean, hell, that's like reading a good book. But you know more about it than I do, I believe.

I PORTWOOD: I only know what you told me. So I don't know - I just know you were there.

B PORTWOOD: I was more than there (laughter). But I can't tell you.

BRANTLEY: Did you catch that? I was more than there, he said. And so that's where we were - 50 years later, sitting under the cedars, talking to a man whose brief moments of recall revealed a pride about the life he once led, but a man who was not fully oriented to time and place, a shell of the man investigators tried to talk to in 1965, a man who, by denying his own memories, couldn't even understand himself.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: So what could we possibly hope to understand about him? What were we even doing here? Was it wrong to try and extract something from this man whose mind was so clearly diminished, especially if what he'd said was true, that all he did was kick one of them? According to Alabama law in 1965, everyone who was involved in the attack could be charged equally with murder.

But still, if he didn't swing the club that caused Reeb's fatal injury, how culpable was he really, especially if he couldn't remember the attack? Should a person who has no memory of his role in a crime be held responsible for that crime? Anyway, it was so long ago. Why go back? Why dig this up? Why reopen these old wounds, bother this old man? That was then. What's past is past, water under the bridge.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: But you know what? That's bulls***. We know it's not true. The past is not past. Bill Portwood escaped justice in 1965. And so did the men who

were tried for the murder, acquitted by that all-white jury in a total sham of a trial - and the counternarrative that sprung up in its wake, a story to blame Reeb's death on the civil rights movement itself instead of these vicious thugs who attacked the ministers because they saw them as race traitors; and all these white people who had willed that counternarrative into existence and let it fester for decades.

And now Bill had willed himself to forget his own role in the murder. And we were sitting there evaluating whether that willful forgetting could exempt someone from punishment. Is this what it means to be white, to grant Portwood the benefit of the doubt? This hobbled old man sitting in front of us isn't just an 87-year-old suffering from dementia. He's a 34-year-old in khaki pants and shirt on Washington Street who's avoided punishment for over 50 years.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: We went back to Frances Bowden. She had started us down this road in the first place. She told us about the fourth attacker. And then, after we'd found Bill, she confirmed it was him while saying she would lie to anyone else who might ask. But now that Bill was on tape, it was her turn to go on the record, to tell us that she saw Bill Portwood among the attackers that night.

BOWDEN: Bill is a character. Or he used to be a character. I don't know what he's like now 'cause, damn, I ain't seen him in 30 years, I don't guess.

BRANTLEY: What kind of character - I mean, like an Elmer type of character?

BOWDEN: No, no, no, no. Bill was a good fella, always was a good fella. Now, he was comical, a lot of fun to be around. But - and they always clowned and monkeyed around until one of them would get mad, then there'd be a damn fight - just like all drunks.

GRACE: So you know, we - in reading the FBI files, initially they say - and even the people who were attacked - say four to five people. At one point, the FBI says five to six people. When the attack happened, were there - was there a group of folks?

BOWDEN: Oh, they drawed a crowd after it started. But there wasn't that many there, just the ones doing the beating. But it drawed a crowd, sure did. It drawed a crowd out of here, and it drawed a crowd off the street. So any of them could have told you who it was and what they done. But they just wouldn't do it.

BRANTLEY: It's really unclear when you read the FBI file. You know, pretty quickly, they have people who say Elmer was there, people who say Stanley was there, people who say Duck was there. But nobody ever mentions Portwood. And then later, he surfaces in there. It's unclear, though, why his name was never brought up.

BOWDEN: Well, a lot of them probably didn't know Bill 'cause, now, Bill didn't run with them and drink like they did. Stanley drunk every day, and Elmer was, too. So - but Bill didn't do that. Now, Bill drank occasionally, but he was not an everyday drinker. So that's probably the reason that nobody didn't mention him.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BRANTLEY: All right. Can we make it across?

BOWDEN: I think so, baby.

GRACE: We walked outside with Frances...

BOWDEN: Oh, these are some hell of a streets we pay taxes for, I'm telling you - some hell of a streets.

GRACE: ...Because we wanted to see from her vantage point what she had seen that night.

BOWDEN: Through that door, turn that corner. They come down the sidewalk, went right around. And they come out behind them.

BRANTLEY: All right, wait. So start over. So who's walking down the sidewalk?

BOWDEN: The preachers were. When they come by the window of the Silver Moon, they was waiting on them.

BRANTLEY: Who was?

BOWDEN: Elmer and Duck and Stanley and Bill - they come by the Silver Moon, and they turn the corner. They come out the door and went 'round the corner behind them.

BRANTLEY: So you saw Stanley Hoggle, Duck Hoggle, Elmer Cook and Bill Portwood come out of the Silver Moon.

BOWDEN: And follow them around the corner and attack them, I sure did.

BRANTLEY: So Bill Portwood was, in fact, the fourth man. The other witnesses who saw Portwood cross the street with Elmer and Duck and Stanley to attack the three ministers, they all kept their mouths shut about forward's involvement. Maybe they didn't recognize him. But Frances did recognize him, did know he was there, saw him participate in the attack that killed Jim Reeb. And now, sitting just steps from where the attack took place, she had finally told us the full story of what she'd seen that night.

But why do you think it's important for the truth to be told about what happened now, all these years later?

BOWDEN: Well, it's time to tell the truth - time to tell it. Let false stories go out the window and tell the truth 'cause all they've told since it happened is false stories - people saying what they thought happened. And that's the same thing as telling a lie. If you wasn't there and didn't see it, you don't know what happened. You made it up. So...

BRANTLEY: So telling the truth about what happened, though, like, what could it do, if anything?

BOWDEN: Make people hate me. And I really don't give a s*** (laughter). I really don't. I mean, if the hurts, then I'm sorry. Put a little lotion on it or

powder on it or put some salt on it, whichever one you want to do. But the truth is the truth, and it speaks for itself, stands for itself. Sure does.

GRACE: Frances admitted to lying to investigators and lying during the Reeb trial. The statute of limitations for perjury and for making false statements to the FBI, it ran out during the Nixon administration. But if Frances had said then what she was telling us now, then it seems clear Bill Portwood would also have been tried for murder. Regardless of his role in the attack, according to the law in 1965, he was just as culpable as Elmer Cook and the Hoggles. And the statute of limitations on murder never runs out.

We'll be right back.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: Shortly after Frances confirmed Bill Portwood's involvement in the attack, Chip went down to Selma to follow up with some people. I was in the office, and he called me early in the afternoon and said we needed to record ourselves.

Hey.

BRANTLEY: Hey.

GRACE: Before I turn the recorder on, you had a big sigh.

BRANTLEY: Yeah. Bill Portwood is dead.

GRACE: Oh, my God. Are you serious?

BRANTLEY: Yeah.

GRACE: When did he die?

BRANTLEY: He died September 30.

GRACE: What? How - we...

BRANTLEY: I know.

GRACE: We were there, like, less than a week before that. Weren't we?

BRANTLEY: I know, yeah. Yeah.

GRACE: How did you - what happened? How did you find out?

BRANTLEY: I went to their house. Nobody answered. And so I called on his phone, basically from in front of their house...

GRACE: Yeah.

BRANTLEY: ...And said, hey, I'm in the neighborhood. I'm actually really close. I'd love to come by. She said, that's fine. She goes, but I need to tell you that Bill died...

GRACE: Oh, my God.

BRANTLEY: ...At the end of September. And I was just, like...

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: Bill Portwood died just 11 days after Frances confirmed that he was the fourth man.

AUDREY SUTHERLAND: I used to go hunting with my dad and fishing with - I fished with him a lot. I was his pal, you know? He didn't have a boy, so I was the one that went fishing with him and hunting with him and things like that.

BRANTLEY: That's Audrey Sutherland, Bill Portwood's oldest daughter. When the FBI tried to talk to Portwood in 1965, he refused. But his wife at the time said she believed that Bill was at home helping one of their teenage daughters with some schoolwork. This is that daughter.

A few months after Bill died, I talked to Audrey on the porch of the house where she lives in Selma, the same house where she grew up, where she was living with her mother, father and a younger sister in 1965. Their house was in

West Selma, away from where most of the marches and demonstrations had been happening. So she felt removed from everything.

SUTHERLAND: I knew what was going on, but I just wanted it to be over. And I knew that they were trying to stir up trouble. It was not a peaceful thing in my mind.

BRANTLEY: And so what was your understanding about why they were here?

SUTHERLAND: Trouble. Martin Luther King was here to stir up trouble. The civil rights was just pushed on us. I just wish that there could have been a better way than what happened here.

Well, there's more to this town than just civil rights. In fact, we have a motto that says "From The Civil War to Civil Rights." And they don't care anything about the Civil War part. All they care about is the civil rights. And they're letting everything else just completely die away. And there's more to it here than just that bridge. And it's such a shame.

GRACE: The bridge, the most iconic landmark in the city - all because of the violence that happened there on the day that would become known as Bloody Sunday. It just so happened that Bloody Sunday was also Audrey's 16th birthday. Her dad was absent that morning. Later, he told her he'd been standing at the foot of the bridge waiting for the marchers with the other onlookers. He was close with Sheriff Jim Clark, the leader of the posse, the man who was named in the DOJ lawsuit about voter intimidation, the man who encouraged Frances Bowden to lie to the FBI.

And that day, at the foot of the bridge, Portwood had stood with Elmer Cook and the Hoggle brothers right near Sheriff Clark, watching the state troopers and sheriff's posse as they attacked the marchers - the attack, the images beamed around the world, the call from Dr. King for ministers of conscience to come to Selma and then, two days later, the attack on Washington Street.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

SUTHERLAND: I heard about it on the news 'cause, even at our age, you know, we would watch the news. And I - probably the Reeb sunk in more because it happened in Selma - you know? - and probably because I've heard those names before - you know? Cook and Hoggle and all of them, those are local names.

BRANTLEY: And when did you become aware that your dad was involved somehow?

SUTHERLAND: I guess when my mother told me. She told me that they had been watching our house. I don't know if it was the police, the FBI, whoever - had been watching our house. And I think I said where, you know, where? And she said they had parked down at the end of the street, I guess, or they had been watching our house for weeks - who came and who went, you know? I think that was when I first became aware of it then. And I asked her why, and she told me.

BRANTLEY: What did she say?

SUTHERLAND: She told me that he was suspected of being involved with that Reeb deal.

BRANTLEY: How - what did she say about her interactions with the FBI? - because she clearly was interviewed by the FBI. She said that your dad was home helping you study.

SUTHERLAND: That's what she told me, that she told them that.

BRANTLEY: She told them...

SUTHERLAND: That he was home helping me study.

BRANTLEY: Did it change in any way the way you thought about your dad?

SUTHERLAND: No, no. I wish he would never have been there. I really do. I didn't. You know, if I'd had my druthers, I would rather him not be there. I didn't want him to be around him Elmer Cook.

BRANTLEY: Why?

SUTHERLAND: Elmer Cook was trouble as far as I - he had a bad name.

BRANTLEY: Even then?

SUTHERLAND: Yeah. I knew he was trouble. I would just rather him not been around him. And no, I wasn't proud for him being there.

BRANTLEY: Did y'all talk about that?

SUTHERLAND: Later on. Later on, not then.

BRANTLEY: When later on?

SUTHERLAND: Years later. Much - years later.

BRANTLEY: Like, when you were both - when he was older, you were an adult?

SUTHERLAND: Well, yeah. I never brought it up all those years. I just - and he didn't either until he was much, much older. And we talked about it. And he said he didn't - I just asked him if he hurt that man in any way. And he said no. And I believed him.

BRANTLEY: Why did you ask him then? Is it something you felt you needed?

SUTHERLAND: I knew in my heart of hearts that he didn't. I just wanted to hear him say it. I just wanted to hear him say it. That's all.

BRANTLEY: And what else did y'all talk about that night? Did you talk about any other details about the night, or was that your only question for him?

SUTHERLAND: That was my only question.

BRANTLEY: Did he ever say who did it?

SUTHERLAND: Well - we did - that wasn't - he did say something about Elmer. Elmer did it. Elmer did it. It was Elmer.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: Bill Portwood told us that for years he had tried to will away the memory of that night, to learn not to hear it. But despite his best efforts, toward the end of his life, he still heard it. And he had told his daughter Audrey about it.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BRANTLEY: Were you scared for your dad during that period of time?

SUTHERLAND: No, he was friends with Jim Clark. No.

BRANTLEY: Was the sense that those guys were kind of above the law because they were such good friends with Jim?

SUTHERLAND: No. No, they were not above the law.

BRANTLEY: But they did escape justice, so to speak. I mean, do you think that had something to do with their standing in the community or their closeness with Clark or with any of these other people?

SUTHERLAND: That was the South and the way it was back in the South then. And I hate they got off. I really do. They were guilty as everything, and they got off because it was the South during the '60s. What do you expect? They were white men. They had certain rules you go by. I mean, that jury knew the verdict before they went in there. It was just set and dried. This was a white jury. This was the rules back in the '60s. You just don't convict a white man for this civil rights stuff. You just don't do it. That's what they had to do.

GRACE: That's what they had to do. This is such a common refrain in this story. Hell, in the entire history of our country, this is a common refrain. The people of the past were governed by rules different than the ones we live by

now, and so it's not fair to judge them. Their choices were inevitable. They had to do it.

But what does it mean to treat the people of the past like this, like they had no free will, no choices? When we say the past is off limits for our judgment, we're not just saying leave it alone. We're convincing ourselves that our past has nothing to do with our present.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: Our mission from the beginning has been to set the historical record straight, to tell you the true story of what happened to Jim Reeb. And it's this - on the night of March 9, 1965, Elmer Cook, Stanley Hoggle, Duck Hoggle and Bill Portwood crossed Washington Street around 7:30 p.m. and assaulted Jim Reeb, Clark Olsen, and Orloff Miller.

Elmer Cook first swung the club and hit Jim in the head. This squares with what Francis Bowden, the eyewitness, told us, and with what Clark and Orloff testified to at the trial in 1965. The Hoggles and Bill Portwood had participated in the assault, too. And according to the law, they were just as culpable for the murder as Elmer Cook. But Elmer, Stanley and Duck had been acquitted on the murder charge. And Bill had managed to avoid being tried altogether, hadn't even been brought into it until we knocked on his door.

MICHAEL JACKSON: Well, to be quite frank, that's the big problem with cold case - first, trying to find live witnesses on a cold case, and the second thing is people memory on a cold case. That's why the quicker you solve a cold case, the better - because after years dragging, it just gets harder and harder and harder.

GRACE: That's Michael Jackson again, the current district attorney for Dallas County, the man who had reopened the Jimmie Lee Jackson case.

JACKSON: When you got several folks hitting somebody and kicking them, you don't realize the severity of what you're doing. And you're doing, and then you're getting caught up in it, kicking and beating. But one person actually goes a little too far and smashes somebody in the head with a stick or

something, and it kills the person. But you got four or five others that were kicking. Do you charge all of them with murder? You know? It's - you're always in that moral dilemma. That's always a tough question for a prosecutor. Believe me.

GRACE: We wanted to lay out for him everything we'd learned. To be clear, we are journalists, not law enforcement officials. But still, John Fleming's interview with Fowler, Fowler's confession to shooting Jimmie Lee Jackson, that's what had prompted Michael Jackson to reopen that case. So we went to his office to tell him everything we'd found - the fourth man, everything that Frances had begun to unspool for us.

BRANTLEY: But then Duck died, and we went back more times...

JACKSON: So what's the official version of what actually happened?

BRANTLEY: Well...

GRACE: You want to play Frances' tape?

BRANTLEY: Sure, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Do you have it?

GRACE: Yeah. I mean, it's on my...

BRANTLEY: It's on the - yeah.

GRACE: So we played Michael Jackson tape of Frances telling us what she saw, telling us she saw Elmer Cook, the Hoggles and Bill Portwood attack the three ministers on Washington Street.

BOWDEN: So any of them could have told you who it was and what they done, but they just wouldn't do it.

GRACE: And we also played them this bit from the end of our first interview with Frances.

BOWDEN: Well, it is a part of my life, and I can't change that. But as far as being proud of it, I'm not proud of it. I'm not proud of being up in the courtroom telling a lie - 'cause I did tell a lie. I said I didn't know, and I did know. But I'm just - I can't change what happened. I wish I could. But there's nothing I can do about it. I can't change it.

JACKSON: Man, that's interesting. You got an actual eyewitness who saw everything. But it didn't come out in the trial...

BRANTLEY: Well, yes...

JACKSON: ...Which is not surprising, of course, but - given the time back then. But still, to live with that all these years. If she had said something different, who knows whether she'd still be around right now. You know, she probably would have been destroyed economically and every other way...

GRACE: Yeah, I don't think I've...

JACKSON: ...Ostracized by her community at the time.

GRACE: She portrays herself as so tough. That's her brand. But she must have been terrified.

JACKSON: Oh, no doubt. I mean, she had to know what would have happened had she went the exact opposite way and told the full truth. But it's always good to relieve yourself of certain burdens before you die.

BRANTLEY: Yeah.

JACKSON: I know she probably feels better that that got - finally got off her chest.

BRANTLEY: Why do you say that?

JACKSON: Because she had - there had to be a certain amount of guilt, not telling the truth back then. Even though she rationalized in her head that she had to do what she had to do back then, there had to be some kind of guilt that

she's had to carry, yeah, which might be a part of her tough exterior as a shield and a front for what's really going on inside.

GRACE: Let me ask you this because we found Portwood. We got this sort of interesting new information that all I did was kick one of them. And then as we said, this aphasia came. You know, it's really hard to get him - and this was not on tape. So we worked for a long time. We'd visit. Some days he was better; some days he was worse. Finally, we got him on tape. And it felt like what we needed to do was to get what we could do and present it to the public. And I tell you all this because Bill Portwood died in the fall of last year.

JACKSON: That's what I was about ask - was that guy still alive? Is he the last one left?

GRACE: Yeah.

JACKSON: Yeah.

GRACE: And when he died, as you might imagine from our perspective, it was crushing because it felt like - we wanted it - if nothing else, we wanted our story to come out while he was alive so that at least there could be some public accountability, you know?

JACKSON: Yeah, 'cause if had come out alive, somebody - one of these federal folk might have grabbed it and done something. But who knows? 'Cause every - it seemed like it was a lot out there. This is amazing to hear, that all this was out there at the time they opened up these cold cases. And none of this ever - this just was closed.

BRANTLEY: During my first visit with Bill and Ina Portwood, I asked him what he could remember about that night on Washington Street. He shook his head and said, I can see it in my head, but I can't say it. A couple of years ago, I could have told you, but not now. The number of times we have wished aloud to each other that we had looked into all this a few years earlier - if we had looked into it earlier, maybe we could have persuaded some people to talk when something still could have been done. Well, it turns out somebody did look into it earlier.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED BROADCAST)

STEVE INSKEEP, BYLINE: Murders that were once ignored or under-investigated during the civil rights era are finally getting more attention. A new bill before Congress proposes the creation of special units within the FBI and the Justice Department. These units would investigate cold cases before the perpetrators die off.

GRACE: The Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, known as the Till Bill, was passed in 2008. The new law tasked the FBI and the Department of Justice to re-examine unsolved racially motivated murders from the era, looking for cases where a prosecution might still be viable. They cast a wide net and came up with around a hundred cases to reopen, cases with evidence, witnesses, suspects.

CYNTHIA DEITLE: So you do a deep dive and all that, and we narrowed the list pretty well to the cases that we knew we needed to focus on that just - let's just make sure. Let's just make sure.

GRACE: That Cynthia Deitle. She's now retired from the FBI, but from 2008 until 2011, she was the FBI's civil rights unit chief, which meant she oversaw the cold case initiative for the bureau. The murder of Jim Reeb was one of the cases they looked into.

DEITLE: We wanted to make sure that every person who committed one of these homicides had been identified and investigated because some of the cases we really were looking at - are you sure there's no one else that helped? Sure there's no one else that could be investigated or prosecuted today? - you know, now that we're really giving it thorough time and attention.

GRACE: The 100 or so cases were divvied up between field offices, and agents in those offices were tasked with looking into the cold cases on top of the work they were already doing. The reinvestigation of Reeb's murder landed in the field office in Mobile, Ala.

JACKSON: Well, they came up to my office and talked to me.

BRANTLEY: This is Michael Jackson again, remembering when he first heard from the agent assigned to look back into the case.

JACKSON: They were saying they were going out and were going to start looking for witnesses and that kind of thing. But now, what exactly they did, you know, you - when somebody say they're investigate, unless you ask them directly - what exactly did you do? - investigation could be as far as looking through some newspaper articles or something - reading some articles. I don't know what they did.

BRANTLEY: He's right. The agent actually did start by going through old newspaper articles. Through a Freedom of Information Act request, we received a redacted copy of the file on the reinvestigation. From it, we were able to glean that the investigating agent did the following.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: In July 2008, the agent went to the National Archives up in Maryland and got all the same information we have. Then in August 2008, the agent interviewed Elmer's widow. She said she understood that Elmer had been falsely accused, that, quote, "she heard Reeb was beaten by cohorts in the ambulance," end quote. Next, the agent tracked down death certificates for both Elmer Cook and Stanley Hoggle. Then, the agent goes to Bama Motors, where he finds Duck Hoggle, who was still alive in 2008. But Duck says the same thing to the FBI that he said to us. He refuses to talk. And apparently, that's the end of it. The agent writes, quote, "a review of the 1965 file provides no leads for further investigation," end quote.

Remember; this is the file that details how agents in 1965 tried twice to interview Bill Portwood, the one in which Stanley Hoggle, one of the defendants, tells agents that Bill Portwood was with them that night. The agent didn't talk to Clark Olsen. He didn't talk to Bradley Capps, who had told us that the whole damn town knew who committed the attack. And he definitely didn't talk to Francis Bowden, who, in 2008, was sitting a couple of blocks from the courthouse smoking her Winston Light 100s in the office of Selma Bail Bond. We requested an interview with the agent, but the agent declined to discuss the case.

DEITLE: If I'm the agent in Birmingham and I get the James Reeb case assigned to me and I just look at, you know, the first few documents in the file - like who's James Reeb? - oh, right, right, right. OK, I remember this guy. OK. I got it. Right away, just three sentences into what happened, my first thought is going to be, there's no federal crime.

GRACE: OK. So here's the big caveat about the Civil Rights Cold Case Initiative, and it's been one of the biggest critiques since it was authorized. The FBI can only pursue federal charges, not state charges. They are, after all, the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And federal jurisdiction on these cases is very narrow, limited to just three things - bombings, kidnappings or, if in the commission of a murder, crossing state lines. If there are none of those things - and the Reeb case had none of them - an agent might quickly determine there was nothing else to be done.

We told Deitle that we found a fourth man, that his name was right there in the 1965 file, that his address was in the phonebook, that we knocked on his door and he told us he'd been there, that he was one of the four men who'd attacked the ministers on the street that night, that by the time we found him, he was addled by strokes, claimed not to be able to remember much. And now he was dead. But 10 years ago, when Bill was of sound mind, the agent who handled the reinvestigation could have found this fourth man.

DEITLE: If the agent now is asked - well, why didn't you interview this person or, hey, I found this guy and you didn't. Why didn't you? I'm sure the answer is going to be, well, that's not going to lead me to a federal crime, so I don't know what you want me to do with this. That's going to be the answer. If there was no one to be charged under federal law, they were going to close the case, as you probably saw from the vast majority of the cold cases.

GRACE: In fact, the Civil Rights Cold Case Initiative has claimed only one successful federal prosecution of an old racially motivated case.

BRANTLEY: Had we come to you in 2010 with the name Bill Portwood...

DEITLE: Oh, that's a great question.

BRANTLEY: ...What would have happened? What could have happened? Or not even what could have happened - what should have happened?

DEITLE: What should have happened. Doesn't it always depend on who you're asking, though? I mean, if...

BRANTLEY: But I'm asking you.

DEITLE: If you're asking Cynthia the FBI agent, I would say, if there is a federal crime, we can prosecute that. But if there's not, there's nothing we can do. But again, it's - that's not a sufficient answer. It just isn't - it's not a sufficient answer for you, who's trying to tell a story. It's not a sufficient answer for Reeb's family either of - sorry, nothing we can do. Well, there's got to be something you can do. I mean, come on; You're the FBI. Can't you do something?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: What the FBI did do in 2011 when they made the determination to close the case was to send a letter to Marie Reeb in Casper, Wyo. A special agent hand-delivered the letter. It read, we regret to inform you that we are unable to proceed further with a federal criminal investigation. Please accept our sincere condolences.

So this top - the top sheet here looks like the - to do with the 2011. So you got this letter, I think, notifying you that the FBI was going to close the case officially.

MARIE REEB: Yes.

GRACE: When you heard that they were going to reopen this case, did you have any thoughts about what that might - did it feel - what did it feel like to you when you heard they were going to reopen it?

REEB: Well, I actually felt that something might be done finally. And - but it didn't come to pass that...

BRANTLEY: Next time, the final chapter.

DREW COOK: Dear Mr. Reeb, I don't even know how to begin this letter. But I write you now out of a deep desire to communicate my sadness and shame over what happened to your father. I feel so deeply precisely because it was my grandfather, Elmer Cook, who was one of the men who perpetrated the violence that took your father's life.

BOB COOK: Well, again, I know it's wrong. And I never have been proud of the fact that it happened. So - and I hate it for his family.

JOANNE BLAND: I don't know what it's going to take to make the world right. I do know that you should not be sitting waiting for it to happen. You need to find out where we've been, then take us where we're supposed to go.

BRANTLEY: That's next time on WHITE LIES.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "I KNOW I'VE BEEN CHANGED")

CHINA PETTWAY AND JACKLIN YOUNG BATES: (Singing) I know I been changed. Oh, I know I been changed. Lord, I know I been changed. The angels in heaven done signed my name. Lord, I know I been changed. Oh, I know I been changed. Lord, I know I been changed. Oh, the angels in heaven down signed my name. I stepped in the water, and the water was cold. Well, the angels in heaven done signed my name. It chilled my body but not my soul. Well, the angels in heaven done signed my name. Oh, I know I been changed. Oh, I know I been changed.

GRACE: WHITE LIES is produced by us, Graham Smith, Nicole Beemsterboer and Connor Towne O'Neill, with help from Cat Schuknecht. Our researcher is Barbara Van Woerkom.

BRANTLEY: Robert Little edits a show along with N'jeri Eaton, Keith Woods and Christopher Turpin. Audio engineers include Jay Sizz (ph) and Alex Drewinzkis (ph). Music is composed by Jeff T. Byrd. Special thanks to China Pettway and Jacklin Young Bates for the use of this song, "I Know I've Been

Changed," courtesy of Matt Arnett. A big thanks also to Bergen Matthews (ph) and Steve Grauberger (ph).

GRACE: Neal Carruth is NPR's general manager for podcasts, and Anya Grundmann is the senior vice president for programming. Visit us on the web at npr.org/whitelies.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "I KNOW I'VE BEEN CHANGED")

PETTWAY AND YOUNG BATES: (Singing) I been changed. God know I been changed. I been changed. I been changed. I been changed. God know I been changed. I been changed. Somebody cry Monday. I been changed. Say I know I been changed. I been changed. On a Tuesday - I been changed. Say I felt like running - I been changed. One Wednesday morning - I been changed. Say I didn't feel the same. I been changed. On a Thursday - I been changed. Say I felt brand new. I been changed. On a Friday - I been changed. Say I know I been changed. I been changed. On a Saturday...

S1 e7

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

JIM REEB: If you came this morning hoping to hear a message of hope, in many ways I will have to discourage you.

CHIP BRANTLEY, HOST:

It's July 1964. This recording is from the All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. This is Jim Reeb delivering his final sermon.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

REEB: There were many people who seemed to feel that once we'd had the march on Washington and once we had the civil rights bill, things were just

inevitably going to be easier, that somehow we'd done it. And I can say to you only that I think that this is the most dangerous kind of self-delusion, that we have not in any way done it. And that just to the extent that we think we have, we're going to be dismayed when we find out that we have not.

And just to the extent that we permit ourselves to be emotionally dismayed, we ourselves as individuals will in some small way add to this thing that is known as the backlash, which is real and, I feel, in many ways growing, and in many ways possibly stronger than we surmise as yet.

BRANTLEY: Eight months after he delivered this sermon, Jim Reeb went to Selma, Ala., to show support for the voting rights campaign there. Less than 24 hours later, he was attacked on the corner of Washington Street by a group of men he'd never met before. Reeb died two days later in a Birmingham hospital.

(SOUNDBITE OF AROMA'S "ZORBA'S DANCE (SIRTAKI)"

BRANTLEY: We focused all this time on trying to figure out what happened on the street corner that night, to understand this brief moment of violence and what came after. And we did that. We tracked down witnesses. We identified the attackers. We untangled the history from the mythology to get the true story of what happened to Jim Reeb.

ANDREW BECK GRACE, HOST:

But there is no justice here at the end of our story, at least not in the way we're taught to think about justice - no redemption. And as Jim Reeb said in his sermon, it would be a dangerous kind of self-delusion to think otherwise. So the question is, once you've called a lie a lie, what does it mean to live with the truth?

(SOUNDBITE OF AROMA'S "ZORBA'S DANCE (SIRTAKI)"

GRACE: From NPR, this is WHITE LIES. I'm Andrew Beck Grace.

BRANTLEY: And I'm Chip Brantley.

(SOUNDBITE OF AROMA'S "ZORBA'S DANCE (SIRTAKI)"

RON ENGEL: Jim, I'll just say right off, would not have wanted to be remembered as a martyr. As profound and as moving and as important as the story of his death was, Jim was being lost.

BRANTLEY: This is Ron Engel. He and Jim worked together at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., in the early 1960s. And in the last years of Jim's life, Ron was among his closest friends.

GRACE: I think it's so interesting, and it's something we've thought a lot about, this idea that Jim is not a real person for many Americans who know his story. He's simply a person who fulfilled a calling, whose death is so much more important and memorable than his life. I'm not saying that's what I think. I'm saying that's the story that gets projected so much.

And he has been seen as a martyr in this country for longer than he was alive. And how, then, do we go back and create him as a real person? I mean, it's almost a philosophical question about storytelling. I'm just curious if you have thoughts about it.

ENGEL: (Laughter). I think you have to go back and put Jim in context.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: Before Jim Reeb was transformed into a martyr, he was a real person - a husband, a father of four. He was born on January 1, 1927, in Wichita, Kan. He was an only child. When he was 7 years old, the dust storms swept through the Midwest. And Jim was bedridden with a terrible bout of rheumatic fever. The wind blew dust through the cracks around windows and doors and into the bedroom where Jim lay. So his mother, Mae, stayed by his bedside, draping wet cloths over his mouth to help him breathe.

GRACE: The family moved to Casper, Wyo. when Jim was 15. A few years later, he met Marie, and they were married - college at St. Olaf, and then seminary at Princeton. Jim had been a pious child, a Presbyterian destined for the pulpit. But after Princeton, he began to question his faith. And that

questioning led him to the Unitarian Universalists, and ultimately to the position of assistant minister at All Souls in D.C.

All Souls was one of the most important churches in the denomination, and his job there was enviable. But in the last two years of his life, Jim became restless. He felt the comfortable position at All Souls was in conflict with the values he preached. And in the turbulence of the early '60s, the beginning of the civil rights movement, he saw growing inequality and injustice all around.

And so he made a surprising decision - to leave All Souls and seek a new position where he could engage more directly with the community outside the church's walls. Ron Engel had a stack of letters Jim had written to him during this time.

ENGEL: Here's when he was looking for a church. He had trouble communicating to the UUA department of the ministry of what kind of church he wanted to serve. And he wrote, (reading) the department of ministry assures me they will get my name on lists of desirable churches. If there is anything I'm not interested in, it is joining the list of those looking for desirable churches. What the hell is a desirable church?

I mean, here was the crux of the matter. Were we serious about what kind of a religious and political community we were seeking to nurture?

BRANTLEY: After months of searching, Jim began to feel that really any church, with its institutional structures and administrative responsibilities, would interfere with the community organizing he felt called to. So he took a job in Boston with the American Friends Service Committee working on low-income housing issues out of a storefront office in the city's majority-black Roxbury neighborhood. It was important to Jim to live in the same place where he worked, to raise his family there, to send his kids to the local schools.

ENGEL: OK, here's one about when they were looking for the house. This is the fall of 1964. (Reading) It took me many days of looking to find this house. It is three floors, 11 rooms and full basement, plus a vacant lot across the street. It was difficult to find this house. Almost no one wants to encourage

you to move here. One lady asked me if I was crazy when I told her I really wanted to move into the neighborhood.

Then he goes on to say, (reading) the children are in school and in general happy. John wanted to help to integrate his class. Some gal in Washington wanted to know if I really wanted my children to go to school with negroes. And I said yes, of course. All children are lucky who integrate schools. Marie is fine, busy getting the house in order. I am faced every day to stretch my mind. There are new problems, new ideas and new experiences to deal with. I have seized the bull by the horns. I am doing what seems important. And let the damn torpedoes come.

GRACE: Wow, that's something else.

ENGEL: It is. It's...

GRACE: That really - I feel that's - I must say on a personal level, like, having worked on this story about him for so long, this is kind of first time I've ever felt in his presence to some extent. It's a kind of a peculiar feeling, really.

ENGEL: Andy, that's - let me just go on. Here is Jim. (Reading) We have a challenge to meet as a family. We are together sharing in what I think will probably be one of the most significant times in our lives. We are all amazingly well, and I am spending more time with the family than ever before. We have finally got our ping pong table. And Marie, John and I play regularly. We are resuming our Friday night birthday festival. We have a cake, candles. Someone tells us about a person we admire, and we sing "Happy Birthday."

GRACE: Wow.

ENGEL: (Reading) We think of you and are grateful for your friendship across the miles. Jim, Marie and the Indians.

GRACE: Wow. Yeah.

ENGEL: So that's - that was the Jim. I mean, that was the...

GRACE: Yeah.

ENGEL: ...Jim Reeb that we all - there you are.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

EDGAR NEEDHAM: Do you think the cause for which your husband came to Selma was worth it?

BRANTLEY: This is Marie Reeb in 1965 speaking to the press from the hospital in Birmingham.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MARIE REEB: I don't feel that I can answer that for myself. I can only answer for Jim, that any consequences that might occur did merit this.

BRANTLEY: After returning to Boston, Marie gathered her children and moved almost immediately back to Wyoming. Her family and Jim's family were both in Casper, and she would need help with their four children. For many, Jim had become a martyr for racial equality, his death a flashpoint in the civil rights movement.

But for Marie, Jim was a husband and a father and a partner. And so as Jim's death became a public spectacle, Marie chose to keep her grief private. She has not spoken to the press since that brief and painful interview from the Birmingham hospital on March 10, 1965.

GRACE: We knew all along we needed to talk to the Reeb family, but we wanted to finish our reporting first so we could tell them everything we learned. So we got in touch with Jim and Marie's daughter, Anne, who had become a kind of spokesperson for the family. We explained to Anne what we'd been working on. And she said she'd talk it over with her mom and the rest of the family.

When we heard back from her a few weeks later, she said Marie felt uneasy about doing an interview. Over the years, Jim's life had been consumed by the

story of his death. And Marie had stayed away from all that. And now two guys from Alabama she'd never met before wanted to come talk with her about it. If Marie was going to talk to us, we would need to come out to Wyoming and make the case in person to the whole family.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: This is Marie Reeb's home in Casper, Wyo., the same house she moved the family into in the spring of 1965. There's a large framed portrait of Jim on the wall as you walk in the front door. We all sit in the living room. John, Jim and Marie's oldest child who was 12 when his father died, is here with his wife, his two children and his grandchildren.

And Anne is here from California with her son. He makes us a special breakfast, a Reeb family tradition, what they call roll-up pancakes. Then after breakfast and an hour of visiting, Marie turns to us and agrees to be interviewed once again.

M REEB: And the six months that we were in Boston was the happiest that we had because Jim was just getting started on a job. And he had - he hadn't said he was going to be on this committee or that - that organization. (Laughter). And we had lots of time together. And Sundays, we would - after church, we would have a picnic lunch somewhere. We'd go someplace where we'd never been before. But it was a happy time.

GRACE: Was that a hard decision, for you to come back here? Or did it just seem obvious?

M REEB: It was a no-brainer (laughter). It was what I thought I needed to do and to have my children safe. And my main concern were for my four children. And we were such a short time in Boston that I had no real ties. So family was in Wyoming, and Mom and Dad Reeb had lost their only son. And so I wanted my children to be there for grandparents.

GRACE: So I know a lot has been made of his decision to go to Selma. And I wonder if you can kind of talk about what you remember about that. I know that's probably a hard memory, but...

M REEB: Well, we saw, of course, Bloody Sunday watching the TV, just a horrible feeling to see what was going on and seeing all that taking place. And so then, of course, when Dr. King was asking for anyone to come down and help and members of the clergy, he just looked at me. And he says, I have to go. (Laughter).

And I said really? After looking at what we saw on the screen, and you're wanting to go down into that situation? I still have to go. So we packed a bag and took him Monday evening to Logan Airport and saw him off.

GRACE: Were you angry at him at all?

M REEB: I can't be angry. I couldn't be angry. I was upset that he wanted to go but not angry.

GRACE: And do you - what do you remember of the University Hospital in Birmingham?

M REEB: They were very nice to me. They provided a bed for me to sleep in when I was ready. So of course, they came and said that, you know, there was no hope. So I went in to see him. And I, for some reason - and I thought later, why didn't you just go and hug him and whatever? But I just looked at him and knew that he wasn't going to live and just...

GRACE: Marie was in Birmingham with Jim's father. President Johnson and Lady Bird sent yellow roses to them at the hospital. And after Jim died, the president sent a government airplane to take them back to Boston.

BRANTLEY: So how old were you?

ANNE REEB: I was 5.

GRACE: This is Anne Reeb.

A REEB: My memory is when my sister and I were sitting with you, Mom. And we were - you were telling us that Dad had been hurt and that - I never, ever remember you saying that he was killed. But I remember you saying he was

hurt and that he would never be coming back. But I remember Karen and I being upset. And I remember someone was holding Steven. I can't remember who had Steven in his arms. And I remember John was very upset and upstairs in his room.

And I do remember that memory, that it was something big had happened, something larger and important. And I remember feeling - as I got older, I remember feeling somehow an understanding why you had to be so courageous and strong, but then also wondering that we could have - there was an absence of us being able to share in that grief somehow because we were little. And I think John held...

M REEB: John...

A REEB: ...John held the grief, a lot of that, as - being a 12-year-old and understanding it the most.

BRANTLEY: Does that ring true to you, John?

JOHN REEB: Yes.

BRANTLEY: I'm curious, John, do you mind if I ask you? Do you remember much about moving to Casper from Boston?

J REEB: Not really. I just remember that the president, Johnson, had sent a plane for us to come back. Right, Mom? That's about the highlight of what I remember.

A REEB: I can't remember when it was, but there was a point at which I knew that my dad died in Selma and that someone - he was murdered. And then I had to go through that whole process. And just right after we moved here, I remember feeling like he was going to come in the door. He was going to come - he was going to come back. He was going to come home.

M REEB: One thing I regret to this day is that, having children go through this type of experience with the death of the father, that I didn't have some professional help, maybe - and especially for John, whose life has been

affected through many, many years. And that's one thing I regret doing - not doing, I should say, not doing.

BRANTLEY: Four generations of Reebs had gathered in Marie's living room that morning - sitting on couches, perching on armrests, bouncing babies on knees. And laid out before us on the coffee table in the middle of the room were boxes and boxes of things about Jim.

(CROSSTALK)

BRANTLEY: One box was full of newspaper clippings, another stuffed with letters from people across the country. And there was a box that contained files related to the investigation and the trial.

M REEB: Yeah, I have no idea what's in that file, Anne. It just said Reeb trial. I haven't read this. And...

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Have you ever read it?

M REEB: No.

A REEB: I thought you did, Mom.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: I'm sure there's a lot of things...

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: No, I don't think she ever did.

M REEB: I...

A REEB: Did you not want to read that?

M REEB: I didn't want to read it, no.

A REEB: Why? Just too much?

M REEB: I just - I didn't want to hear what they were saying, you know? And for years and years, I never remembered their names that was in the trial because I didn't want to see faces or names, and I didn't want to have any kind

of hate feelings developing for these men. I just didn't want that, so - I would have to look up the names somewhere to even call them to memory.

BRANTLEY: This is the thing about the Reeb family. They haven't dwelled on who committed this murder, on the injustice of the acquittal. But after all these years, they did want some clarity about what happened to Jim. And so sitting there in the living room, we told them everything, the definitive version of that night - about Francis, about Portwood, the counternarrative that had sprung up to absolve these men, and that from everything we'd learned, Elmer Cook was the one who swung the club that caused the injury that killed Jim. And after we'd finished, they didn't think about themselves so much, about their own pain or about a missed opportunity for justice. Instead they thought about what it meant in the lives of the men who had killed Jim.

A REEB: So that was - so it was - it was Cook that had this - the billy club. I can only surmise or imagine that those men had to take that and put that away almost - and put it over - put it somewhere so that they could go on with their lives because you tell yourself so many times, I mean, the story was put out there so that they - because they're not telling the truth. They know that that was wrong. They know what they did was wrong. They took someone's life. They beat three men on the street, and yet, they had to take that and put that over there and compartmentalize that and start to even believe their own story that oh, no, they weren't there. Oh, no, that didn't happen. Oh, that was somebody else. Oh, no. Actually, that man died by someone else's hand because the movement needed a martyr. So there's all this compartmentalizing going and various - to cope. They were coping because they were guilty.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: None of the men who killed Jim Reeb had ever been held to account. None of them had ever had to reckon openly with what they'd done. But just a few months after this visit in Marie Reeb's living room in Casper, something completely unexpected happened. Elmer Cook's great granddaughter reached out to the Reebs to try and make sense of it all. That's after this.

GRACE: Not long after we went to Casper to talk to the Reebs, we heard from Jim's daughter, Anne, and his granddaughter, Leah. The two of them were coming to Birmingham to do an interview with a local filmmaker who was making a documentary about the Unitarians' role in the civil rights movement. So we planned to get together while they were in town. But a couple of days before they arrived, Anne called me with some unexpected news. The filmmaker had just given a talk about the film at a local university. And afterwards, a student had come up to introduce herself. She said her name was Katie Cook, that she was Elmer Cook's great granddaughter. And she told the filmmaker that if there was ever an opportunity, she would really like to speak to the Reeb family.

(SOUNDBITE OF PIANO PLAYING)

GRACE: As part of their trip to Birmingham, Anne and Leah had been invited to speak at the Unitarian church. Anne and Leah were sitting in the front row of the church. And sitting at the very back was Katie Cook. They had plans to meet after the service.

(APPLAUSE)

GRACE: And this meeting between Anne and Leah and Katie, nearly 54 years after Jim Reeb's death, it set in motion a series of events that would allow us to trace the legacy of this murder through the generations of the Cook family, to see the different ways they had tried to reckon with it.

(CROSSTALK)

KATIE COOK: Well, I'm really happy that you would want to meet me. So it is, like - it's a little bit intimidating. But I just have to remind myself that, like, I didn't do anything.

LEAH REEB VARELA: That's right.

K COOK: So I think that you're rational people and that you have no reason to be mad at me...

VARELA: No.

K COOK: ...Because, like, when I told people that I was going to meet you, they were like, is that a good idea?

VARELA: Yeah.

K COOK: And I was like, well, I don't think they're mad at me specifically. So...

VARELA: No.

A REEB: No. No, no, no.

VARELA: ...Yeah. I guess Anne will speak to it, too. I was shocked. But I instantly was - so you're a generation below me, right? So my dad is Anne's older brother. He's the oldest of James' kids. What I thought about is just the evolution of change in generations and that you and I get to have a choice as grandchildren and great-grandchildren to believe what we want to believe.

K COOK: I didn't even know about all of this until I was a junior in high school...

VARELA: Yeah.

A REEB: Really?

K COOK: ...Because - yeah. I had always been told that my great-grandfather had been accused of murder because - my mom and the family, for the most part, was like, he was accused. And they had this theory that he just beat - I don't know. I'm just going to say Reverend Reeb.

A REEB: That's fine.

K COOK: OK - that he just beat up Reverend Reeb but then someone else killed him. And I don't know if they truly believe that or - because maybe they truly believe it 'cause they just want to see the good. Or maybe it just helps them cope with it. I don't know. But when I found out about it, I just did a

simple Google search - Elmer Cook Selma. And I was like - oh, my gosh. Like, there was so much stuff.

Like, I read, like, these articles about, like, LBJ getting involved and sending flowers to your mother and MLK speaking at the funeral and just, like, all of that. And I was like, wow. It's really depressing because, obviously, I have some of his DNA. Part of what made him, him is what makes me, me. But like you said, it's how you use it.

VARELA: Totally. Your family history doesn't make you unless you choose it to.

K COOK: And it's kind of ironic that the best way to separate myself from it is to jump straight into it and study it, talk about it and everything. I don't know. I just, like - I think that a lot of people would be ashamed of it. And I'm not because I didn't make those decisions. And so...

A REEB: That's right.

K COOK: ...I want to know from you what it's like to have a father that's, like, such a - like, I can't - like, coming from the complete opposite of you, I know what it's like to have family in negative history. But I don't know what it's like to have a dad who is literally a martyr, who did such a big, huge thing out of his love and compassion for other people. Do you have a lot to live up to?

A REEB: It's hard sometimes. It's hard because I was 5. And so I have just - I have a few memories of him. And so everything that I've learned about my dad, I've learned from my mother, from my older brother John.

And when I was a teen, I started to also look into my history and really start to dig through boxes. And I discovered some reel-to-reels of his sermons, and so I was able to listen to his voice. And it's so funny. The first time I ever heard his voice, I just - I didn't hear one word he said. All I did was just listen to his voice. And it brought back the memories of his voice telling us stories, reading to us at night. So to answer your question, there are times when it's hard for me. It is a lot to tell the story...

K COOK: Yeah.

A REEB: ...You know? It is. It's hard to tell the story because it can bring up some pain. And - but I think that there's value in the story. So yeah.

K COOK: I think that there's value in the story but that there's also some value in the pain from the story...

A REEB: Absolutely.

K COOK: ...Because I am a firm believer that pain sparks empathy...

A REEB: Absolutely.

K COOK: ...And that empathy is the greatest human power. To be able to feel for others and relate to them is, I think, the most important thing in the world because it's the only way that we can all share this world because without it, there's just chaos.

(SOUNDBITE OF KNOCKING)

DREW COOK: Hi.

GRACE: Hello. How are you?

BRANTLEY: Hey, I'm Chip.

D COOK: Come on in. Nice to meet you, Chip.

GRACE: Hey. I'm Andy.

D COOK: Nice to meet you, Andy.

GRACE: I'm sorry. I'm rolling.

D COOK: Oh, no. It's all good. No, no, no.

BRANTLEY: You want us to take our shoes off?

D COOK: Please do, yes.

BRANTLEY: Yeah. We will.

D COOK: New York City's, you know, kind of gross. So...

(LAUGHTER)

D COOK: ...Don't want to track it inside.

BRANTLEY: When Katie Cook learned the story of her great-grandfather, the first thing she did was call her Uncle Drew. Drew was older. And as his grandson, he was one step closer to Elmer himself. He was very close to his grandmother, who the family called Big Momma. Elmer was always called Big Daddy.

Drew has gone through his own process of trying to make sense of his family's history. And he has made a life for himself a very long way away from Selma. We visited him in the apartment he shares with his partner in the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens.

D COOK: I don't know how other families are, but our family is very, very story-based. I mean, I don't remember specifically when they explained the situation to me, but they did eventually. And like, the story that I was told as a child - and maybe this was, like, really dumbed down because I was a child - but that Big Daddy and a couple of his friends were tried for the murder of a man who was - like, apparently the story was like, he was hit in the head or something. Like, he - they got in a fight. And then he was - he had these head injuries, and so they - the ambulance took him to, I think, Birmingham.

And like, when he got into the ambulance, they said he was talking and he was, like, coherent. And then when he arrived in Birmingham, his skull was crushed in. And this is, like, the exact - like, his skull was crushed in - that was, like, the point. And then - that was, like, all they told me really. They never specifically said Big Daddy was innocent or anything like that. They just kind of left me to form my own conclusion about that.

Obviously, the implication is if he got in and he was OK and he arrived and he had his skull crushed, then someone in the ambulance did it or someone else did it. And it's like a conspiracy of some kind against Big Daddy, which is, like, I think now, obviously, absurd. You know, it was a really absurd thing. But...

GRACE: Do you remember - when it was told to you, was it in the - was this event in the context of the civil rights movement at all? Or...

D COOK: In Selma, everything is in the context of the civil rights movement.

BRANTLEY: What happened after the - how did the story get deepened after that? Like, when did you find out more about it or do your own research into what happened?

D COOK: So there was no deepening of the story from them. That was me finding it out. So when I was in high school - well, I don't know. You know, I feel a lot of shame about that. And I mean, shame is something that gay people deal with from an early age. And I felt a lot of shame, but I ignored it for a long time.

GRACE: About what? Yeah.

D COOK: About the fact that my grandfather was a murderous racist. It's not a nice feeling, you know? I mean, I still feel, like, very, like, nasty about that. But...

BRANTLEY: But how did you come to think that he was a murderous racist? 'Cause your family didn't tell you that.

D COOK: Well, I mean, it just - you know, this is my inference based on his behavior towards them. I mean, like I said, if he could treat them that way, I'm sure he could treat other people far worse.

GRACE: Drew was born after Elmer died, but the whole Cook family still lived very much in his shadow. Drew's father, Bob, would tell stories about Elmer's violence. And there seemed to be no shortage of family squabbles and bad

blood. Drew's mother got him out of Selma at 13, moving him to the suburbs of Birmingham. And he credits that move with basically saving him.

D COOK: I spent a lot of time not thinking about Selma and not thinking about my past there because it was, like, painful, and I didn't want to think about it. So that was very much in that category of things I didn't want to think about. But I remember - the next time that it really, like, hit me hard is when I was with - I remember was living in New York City in East Harlem at this, like, tenement that I lived in for, like, five years.

But my best friend, Esther, was living with me at the time. And the movie "Selma" came out - you know, this sort of blockbuster movie. This was, like, 2014 I think. And we were watching it. And James Reeb's murder is dramatized in it. And I remember thinking, like - oh, my God. Oh, my God. I know I'm - this is like - this is - this is James Reeb. This is my grandpa. And so I, like, paused the movie. And I was like - Esther, oh, my God. Oh, my God. I was like - I was really, like, freaking out, you know, because you - I guess I could feel how close these historical events were to me and, like, how just sort of surreal and crazy that is.

You know, it's a very, like, strange feeling. And subsequently, I've told all kinds of people. And it's like - I mean, I don't tell everybody because, like, you know, everyone assumes that everyone from Alabama are these, like, you know, hay-in-your-teeth racists. But if someone seems, like, cool and we're having a long conversation and, like, we're talking about any kind of, like, adjacent issues, like, I'll tell the story because it's crazy. You know, it's, like, a wild, wild story. You know?

GRACE: It's funny what you just said about being from Alabama 'cause - I mean, Chip and I are both from Alabama and of course spent a lot of time - lived outside of the state. And the burden that you feel as an Alabamian to sort of defend the place...

D COOK: Yeah. I know. Oh, God.

GRACE: ...Against the claim - against the claim that, in your case, is absolutely true, which is that you're descended of these, you know...

D COOK: Right, right. That's the other piece, right? It's like, well, s***. How do I talk about this 'cause it's like - 'cause my grandfather is - I mean, he is this, like, murderous villain. You know, he's this like racist villain that people are - like, think exists. I mean, he really - he's like the embodiment of it.

GRACE: Yeah.

BRANTLEY: Right.

D COOK: Those are - that's my family.

BRANTLEY: Drew moved far away. He remade his life. But just like the rest of us, he couldn't escape where he'd come from. And so one day in the fall of 2015, thinking about the Reeb family, Drew Cook sat down to try and write them a letter.

D COOK: ...My desktop. I don't know where it is.

GRACE: What did you name the file?

D COOK: Letter to James Reeb's son. I can read it.

GRACE: Yeah.

D COOK: (Reading) Dear Mr. Reeb, I don't even know how to begin this letter. How could I, really, after so many years of not even knowing the perpetrators, much less the victims? But I write you now out of a deep desire to communicate my sadness and shame over what happened to your father. I feel so deeply precisely because it was my grandfather, Elmer Cook, who was one of the men who perpetrated the violence that took your father's life.

From what I've read, no one really knows who dealt the fatal blow, but I would bet anything it was my grandfather who did it. Something inside just tells me so. I never knew my grandfather. He died in 1972. I was born to his youngest son, Bob, in 1989. While I never really knew him personally, I would tell you that the memories of his violence and madness haunt our family, particularly

my father, to this day. I see it in the irreparable emotional scars he inflicted on his children.

But that's all I've got. I never completed it.

GRACE: As a piece of writing, I mean, I'm trying to put myself in your shoes a little bit, but it seems like you get to a place where I can see why you wouldn't finish it because you're sort of like, what is the ask here, you know? Like, on the one hand, you'd like to maybe express that your grandfather's terror, essentially, terrorized your family, too, but then you probably also think but the man I'm writing to's (ph) father - you know, there must be, like, some push and pull there I would imagine.

D COOK: Probably, and that's probably why I never finished it. I was just like, this is, like, not a great exercise necessarily but I would like to at least communicate a condolence of some kind, you know, like, to say that I'm, you know, I'm sorry that it happened because I am. You know, it's really - it's really tragic, the whole thing.

BRANTLEY: Like, what's the ideal outcome from that gesture in your mind? Like, when you think about writing a letter or getting in touch, like, what do you envision that comes next?

D COOK: I would like to hear what he was like. I mean, he - to me, he seems like a really extraordinary human being, you know? I mean, I've read a little bit about his biography and everything, and he just seems like a really good man, a really decent man and the sort of person that I would like to be in life, you know? You know, to me, he was just a nameless man who died in an ambulance, like, questionably. That was - like, before that, I didn't really understand.

BRANTLEY: Once you've sort of figured another version out - like, have you talked to your parents about that since then? I mean, it sounds like you've...

D COOK: I talked to my mom, but, I mean, my mom and I have a lot more open dialogue than my father and I. My dad and I don't really talk about things that are - we just stick to neutral topics. I just don't want to...

GRACE: Do you think your dad needs to think that his father didn't commit murder?

D COOK: I think so, yeah. I absolutely think that. I absolutely think that. You know, I don't - I think that one of the defining qualities of my dad is that he is, like - he does not have a lot of emotional tools to deal with things. Like, he just has a very limited tool box for that. And so I don't think that he can - he, like, has the emotional bandwidth to deal with some things and, like, that is, like, very firmly one of the things that he just like will never reconcile - like, never try to deal with, I think.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: Still, we asked Drew if he thought his dad, Bob, would talk to us. Drew said he didn't think so, but he'd ask because he did want Bob to hear what we'd found. And then a couple of months later, we heard back from Drew. His dad had decided to hear us out. That's after this.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: Bob Cook is Elmer Cook's youngest child. He lives in Tennessee near the Mississippi-Alabama border, but he didn't want us to meet him at his house. Instead, we met him at the public library in the small town of Iuka, Miss. It was thunder storming that day.

GRACE: So what - did you - you were born in Selma, is that right?

BOB COOK: Yes.

GRACE: So where did y'all live when you were growing up?

B COOK: The - when I was born, we lived on this corner of Second Avenue and Union.

GRACE: What would you - what would you say your dad did?

B COOK: At that time, he had a loan business and - where he loaned money to people. Some might refer to it as loan shark because the interest rate was really high and about all the customers were black. Right across from the Silver Moon, he had a place on the corner that was a pawn shop and right next to it was C&C Novelty. He had the loan company there, and people would come in and pay on their loan. I remember as young as 14 I would get up early, and we'd go out about 4:30 or 4, and maybe when I was even 14 I would drive the truck and he'd - to these houses. And he'd go up there and have a - either a billy club or blackjack, and he always had a pistol. He'd knock on door and tell them they need to come pay. And that was a regular thing, but you would hear, you know, at the doors on some of them hollering and carrying on.

GRACE: Was your dad proud of himself? Was he proud of the work he did and...

B COOK: Good question. I don't - I don't think he felt guilty about anything, so I don't know if he would be proud or - I never saw him look like he was feeling guilty. So I - yeah, I think he was pretty successful.

GRACE: When Elmer Cook was arrested for the murder of Jim Reeb, the Selma Times-Journal printed his prior arrests. Elmer had been arrested 25 times in Selma, 17 of which were for assault and battery. But this rap sheet didn't include the violence he brought home with him.

B COOK: One night, he'd asked me to go the Dairy Queen and get some chili dogs for him. So I drove my car up there and got them when I was there. Some guy was there, and he asked me, would I carry him home? And so I said, yeah. He got in the car. I didn't realize he lived at Craig Field, which was a long way. So when I got back - we had glass across the back of a den, and when I came back, I looked in and see my daddy eating a sandwich. So I knew I was in trouble. So I came in. He started beating me, and I'm not sure if it was that time or another, but he grabbed me by the hair and hit me in the nose and broke my nose.

GRACE: Yeah.

B COOK: And I had to feed the dog - the chili dogs took my dog outside.

(SOUNDBITE OF THUNDER)

GRACE: Wow. That's quite a thunder strike at the end of that story. I - it must've - yeah. I mean, what you say about fear, it must have just been terrifying.

BRANTLEY: How do you live with that? I mean, how do you - how do you process how to be around somebody like that?

B COOK: Well, I was scared when - I could tell what kind of mood he's in. But whenever he was mad, you knew it, and you tried to steer clear and not doing anything wrong. But if there was any confrontation with him - I think he may have been a boxer, too, in the Navy. But if there was any confrontation, then the first thing he's going to do is he hit somebody.

GRACE: Yeah.

BRANTLEY: I'm curious how your dad talked to you about his involvement in the Reeb attack.

B COOK: I - you know, he had told me that he didn't - he did beat those guys, him and Stanley and them, Duck, whoever. But he said he didn't kill him.

GRACE: Did you ask him about that? Was that important for you?

B COOK: I don't know that I asked him. Maybe I did. I don't remember. He just told me that. I don't know. I just remember him saying that he didn't kill - that he felt like somebody else killed him on the way to Birmingham.

GRACE: You think he needed to believe that simply for himself or do you think he...

B COOK: Honestly, I think he really believed it.

GRACE: What makes you think that?

B COOK: Well, from what you hear about it, I mean, you would think so. The whole deal was the guy was - got up with some help and went away. And that's - I think that's the real reason he thought that something else must have happened.

BRANTLEY: That's the story Bob Cook grew up hearing, grew up believing, and no one else in his life had ever offered a different version of events.

GRACE: We found the name of this other man, Bill Portwood. Do you remember Bill Portwood?

B COOK: Yes, I do. He was - used to play golf with my daddy a lot.

GRACE: Yeah. Have you ever heard anything about him being involved?

B COOK: I've heard nothing specific, but I remember hearing something about that he may have been - had something to do with it. I don't remember asking, but I remember him telling me something about it.

BRANTLEY: Drew doubted that his dad would ever be able to deal with the true story of what happened to Jim Reeb. But Bob wanted to meet with us, and he heard us out. And as we talked, it became clear he wanted to sincerely understand what we had found.

GRACE: We told you we'd been researching this story for a long time. And I know when we first sat down, you had some questions. What questions do you have for us about what we've - what we found out?

B COOK: Well, a few things. I didn't ever understand - I mean, I never knew anybody to ask, but why would they not go to the Vaughan or - the Medical Center rather than the Good Samaritan?

GRACE: Well, they actually didn't go to Good Samaritan. They went to Burwell Infirmary. Basically, the white people who were sympathetic to the civil rights movement were told by all the black folks they knew in town that they couldn't go to those hospitals and not only that, but there was not a neurologist, you

know, in the entire city of Selma. So regardless of who he was or what hospital he went to, he would've been sent to Birmingham.

BRANTLEY: He had a couple of other questions about the nature of Reeb's injury.

B COOK: The doctor in Birmingham - did he testify? What did he say?

GRACE: About the ambulance ride and the timeline of events.

BRANTLEY: By 8 o'clock, he's at Burwell being checked into Burwell. By 8:30, he's examined, and the doctor pretty quickly says this guy's injury is severe.

GRACE: Like a lot of people in Selma, Bob had heard that it took hours and hours to get Reeb from Selma to Birmingham.

B COOK: When they stopped, it was due to what?

BRANTLEY: We laid out for him everything we'd learned from the statements we've gathered, the files we'd combed through, the interviews we'd done.

B COOK: But y'all have answered some questions I think that sound very reasonable. Your answer, it makes sense to me. The whole ambulance thing and how and why it took the time, it really wasn't as much time as people had said and several different things that you clarified that I had the wrong understanding or wrong idea about.

GRACE: Where you're not the only one. I mean, it's a very pervasive story in this - in Selma to this day, so it's one of the reasons why we wanted to try to figure out what really happened.

B COOK: Until the information y'all have shared with me today, then I thought it might be like some. But now I'd say that probably not, that it's probably the result of a beating.

BRANTLEY: You mean Jim Reeb's death?

GRACE: How does that make you feel, if that's something you've just sort of come to today?

B COOK: Well, again, I know it's wrong. And I never have been proud of the fact that it happened. So - and I hate it for his family.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

REEB: There is, it seems to me, in each one of us this temptation to be violent.

GRACE: That's Jim Reeb again from his last sermon at All Souls.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

REEB: If these kind of things can so easily arise in our own beings here, where the issues are not of life and death matters, how much more easily must it arise in people who are suffering beyond anything that we can well imagine for ourselves? We are going to have to really take upon ourselves a continuing and disciplined effort, with no real hope that in our lifetime we're going to be able to take a vacation from the struggle for justice.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: We look to the past for all sorts of reasons - to figure out how to separate ourselves from it, to find models for how to live, to better understand who we are - because while we don't have to be defined by the people in our past, they are buried in us.

BRANTLEY: My great-great-great-great-grandfather James Brantley moved from South Carolina to Alabama in the early 1800s. He later married a woman named Elizabeth Kirven. And then James and Elizabeth settled south of Montgomery, near Hayneville where they raised their five children. When James died in 1843, Elizabeth buried him in their backyard and marked the grave with a simple stone. She put a rocking chair beside the stone. And it was her custom to sit there every afternoon and smoke her pipe.

Once James' will was probated, all of this property was deeded to Elizabeth, including the house, the land and nine human beings. The inventory of the will lists their names and their dollar values, beginning with, quote, "one Negro girl, Rose, $250" and ending with, quote, "one Negro boy, Napoleon, $100."

GRACE: And my great-great-great-grandfather, Thomas Posey McConnell, served as a judge in the county just north of where I live today. He fought for the Confederacy. And at the dawn of the war in 1860, he was living up the road, and he owned 16 enslaved people. The eldest was a 63-year-old man, the youngest a 1-year-old girl. After he died in 1903, his tombstone was engraved, the memory of the just is blessed.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

JOANNE BLAND: I don't know what it's going to take to make the world right. I do know that you should not be sitting, waiting for it to happen, for somebody else to do it.

BRANTLEY: That's Joanne Bland again. She was on the bridge on Bloody Sunday, an 11-year-old marching alongside her sister. Joanne has spent much of her adult life in Selma. She co-founded the National Voting Rights Museum here and now gives civil rights tours of Selma. But those tours aren't just about what happened here during the movement.

BLAND: When you talk about reconciliation, you have to talk about a way to distribute the power. And nobody wants to give up any power. Anytime there's a minute shift in power from the people who were holding the power, a battle ensues. I can give you a perfect example, the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Tell me one year it has not been under attack. Come on. I'm listening. So if voting's not important, why would you try to keep it away from me? And why would you try to stop people from voting after they get the right to vote if it wasn't important?

GRACE: Joanne's trying to keep a certain past alive in a place filled with lots of people who want to forget it. And the people who want to forget it, they tell Joanne she needs to look forward, needs to stop dwelling on this history, that it's water under the bridge.

BLAND: What you going to tell me? Oh, yeah, that was then. We need to move on. Unfortunately, we've got too many people who feel that way. So how can you tell me to move on? So you get bogged down in this history, and you stay there. No, no, that's not true. And I want you to realize those same things are still happening today.

BRANTLEY: One of the things we have run into is white people doing this, working on the story and trying to talk to white Selmians (ph) who have some connection directly to the Reeb story, is they have proximity to it, but they want to have nothing to do with it. They don't want to remember. They have forgotten it. They have willed themselves to forget.

BLAND: I mean, you don't like to be reminded of painful things either. And I can't help but think some of them feel not just guilty but incompetent, that some today, if they were honest with themselves, would say they - if they had known that this was going to be the result, resulted in this man's death, they would have gotten up and said something. And now, 53 years later, you didn't get up and say nothing. So now you've got that burden on you.

So my grandmother taught us that all people are good. So it's just sometimes evilness will overshadow that goodness. I had a problem with that when I was growing up. I didn't know any good white people, period - until the movement.

GRACE: During the years we were working on this story, we'd check in every so often with Joanne to see what was happening in Selma, to give her updates on our reporting, on our search for the fourth man, on our attempts to make sense out of it all.

BRANTLEY: I think when we first started, it felt like if we could find that person, that would help something, it would be a piece...

BLAND: Right.

BRANTLEY: ...To plug into that puzzle, you know?

BLAND: Right, to put it all together.

BRANTLEY: Yeah.

BLAND: Yeah, but - and it's - think about the time. It's 53 years later, and most of them were in their late 20s and 30s by then. How old would they be now?

BRANTLEY: Yeah.

BLAND: Too old to talk about it.

BRANTLEY: And we have, at various times, convinced ourselves that a good outcome is just having a - an official version, something as close to the truth as you can get...

BLAND: Right.

BRANTLEY: ...An acknowledgement, of some way, that this happened, that people lied about it at the time. And here is, in fact, what happened.

GRACE: Well, these stories - these kinds of stories so often, like the Jimmie Lee case, it's like, all right, we got the guy. Now we don't have to think about the way - like, the power structure that protected him for so long.

BLAND: Right.

GRACE: And now I can turn the channel and do something else now. I don't have to think about how implicated I am in something.

BLAND: Right, and if you don't, then out of sight, out of mind. If it's not constantly thought of, in your face, you don't have to do nothing about it. So now that we've sealed this up and sealed the envelope, and we can put that in, file that, and we don't ever have to talk about that anymore, even though the pain that their lives and actions caused has determined how I am today. And they don't realize that, how that - it connects thoroughly to me. You've been exonerated because somebody said I'm sorry. But I haven't.

The pain you inflict is still there. This leads to this, and this leads to that. And this led to this, and this led to that. It's a continuous cycle. It's like a tree with branches, that if you cut off one branch, don't mean the damn tree going to die. It's just going to grow another branch. So - (laughter) - and that's what's happening. We need to find the root of all this.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BRANTLEY: The river came first, off the mountains headed toward the sea. And it took thousands of years for the river to cut this bluff out of the chalky white clay. And after the bluff, the people. The first people to settle on this bluff built a town and called it Selma. As they laid the town out, they designated four corner lots for churches, one for a public square, one for a market. And in the middle of the busiest street, they built an auction house where white men could buy and sell black men and women and children. The labor of these enslaved people produced unnumbered bales of cotton, which were loaded onto steamers and sent downriver across the world, enriching this entire young nation, the North and the South.

But the system that built that wealth was vicious and unconscionable. So to justify it, white people hid behind a story. They hid behind a lie. The lie said white people were superior to black people. And this lie would endure long after slavery was abolished, shaping so much about our country - our neighborhoods and our schools, our bank accounts and our prisons - because our present is shaped by our past, just as the bluff was shaped by the river.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRACE: In Selma, it always comes back to the river. One overcast afternoon in 1965, a group of men and women marched across the river on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Awaiting them on the other side was an act of violence so shocking that it forced many Americans to see the brutality of the lie, to say, this is not the country I want to live in.

And one of those people was a man named Jim Reeb, who a couple of days later found himself with two friends standing in front of a restaurant, just as the street lamps were coming on, wondering whether to turn left or right.

BRANTLEY: WHITE LIES is produced by us, Graham Smith, Nicole Beemsterboer and Connor Towne O'Neill, with help from Cat Schuknecht. Our researcher is Barbara Van Woerkom.

GRACE: Robert Little edits the show, along with N'Jeri Eaton, Keith Woods and Christopher Turpin. Audio engineers were Jay Sizz (ph), James Willetts and Alex Drewinzkis (ph). Music is composed by Jeff T. Byrd. The music consultant for WHITE LIES is Lee Shook. Special thanks again to The Dexateens for the use of their song "Take Me To The Speedway," courtesy of Estrus Records.

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BRANTLEY: Be sure to check out our website at npr.org/whitelies. Thanks to the incredible team who made that website happen - Alyson Hurt, Scott Stroud, Thomas Wilburn, Ben de la Cruz, Nicole Werbeck, Desiree Hicks and Susan Vavrick. Meg Anderson is our engagement editor.

GRACE: Our project manager is Mathilde Piard. Nancy Barnes is senior vice president for news, and Anya Grundmann is the senior vice president for

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(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)